SWORD ART ONLINE
unital ring VI
027
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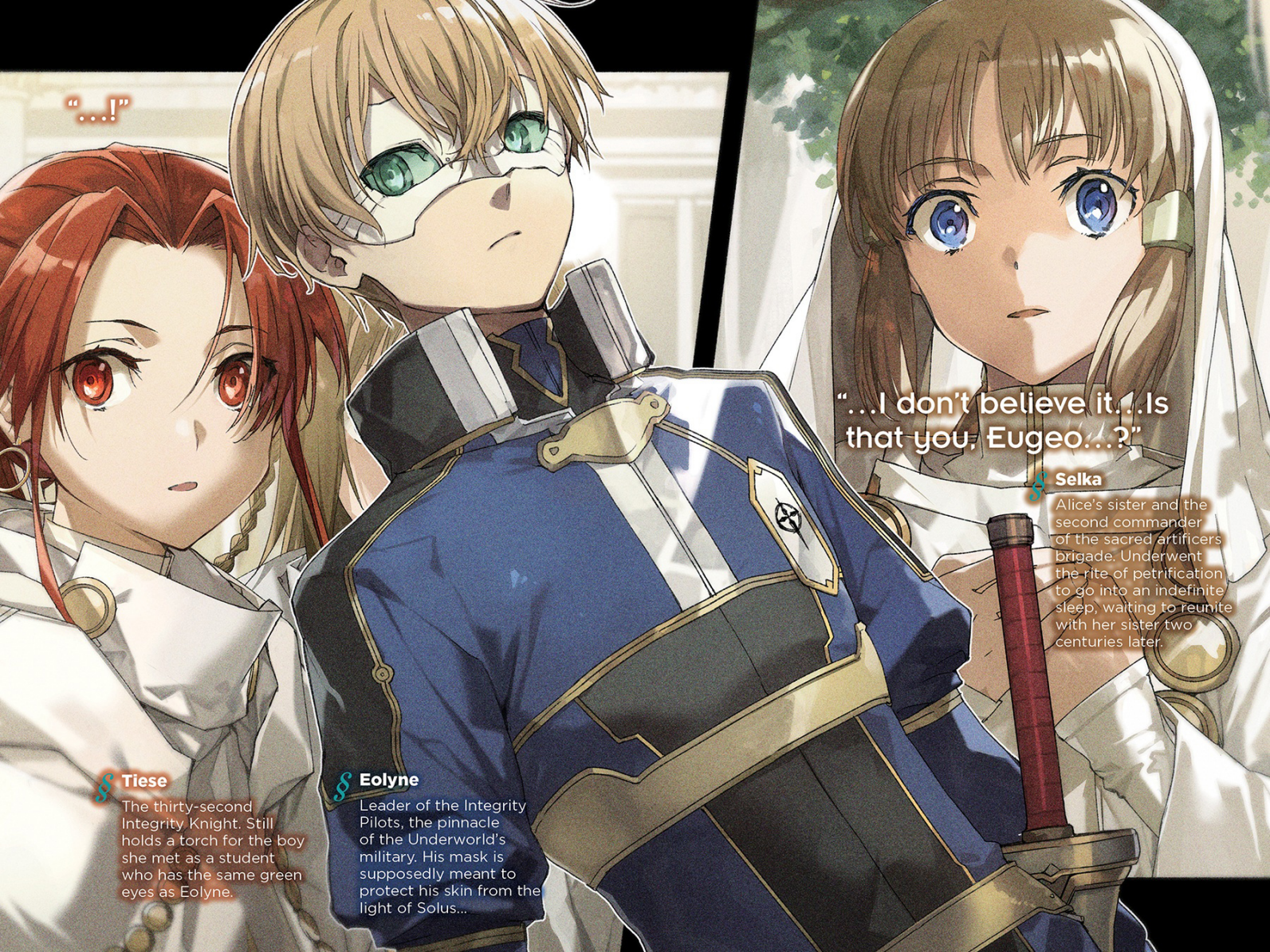
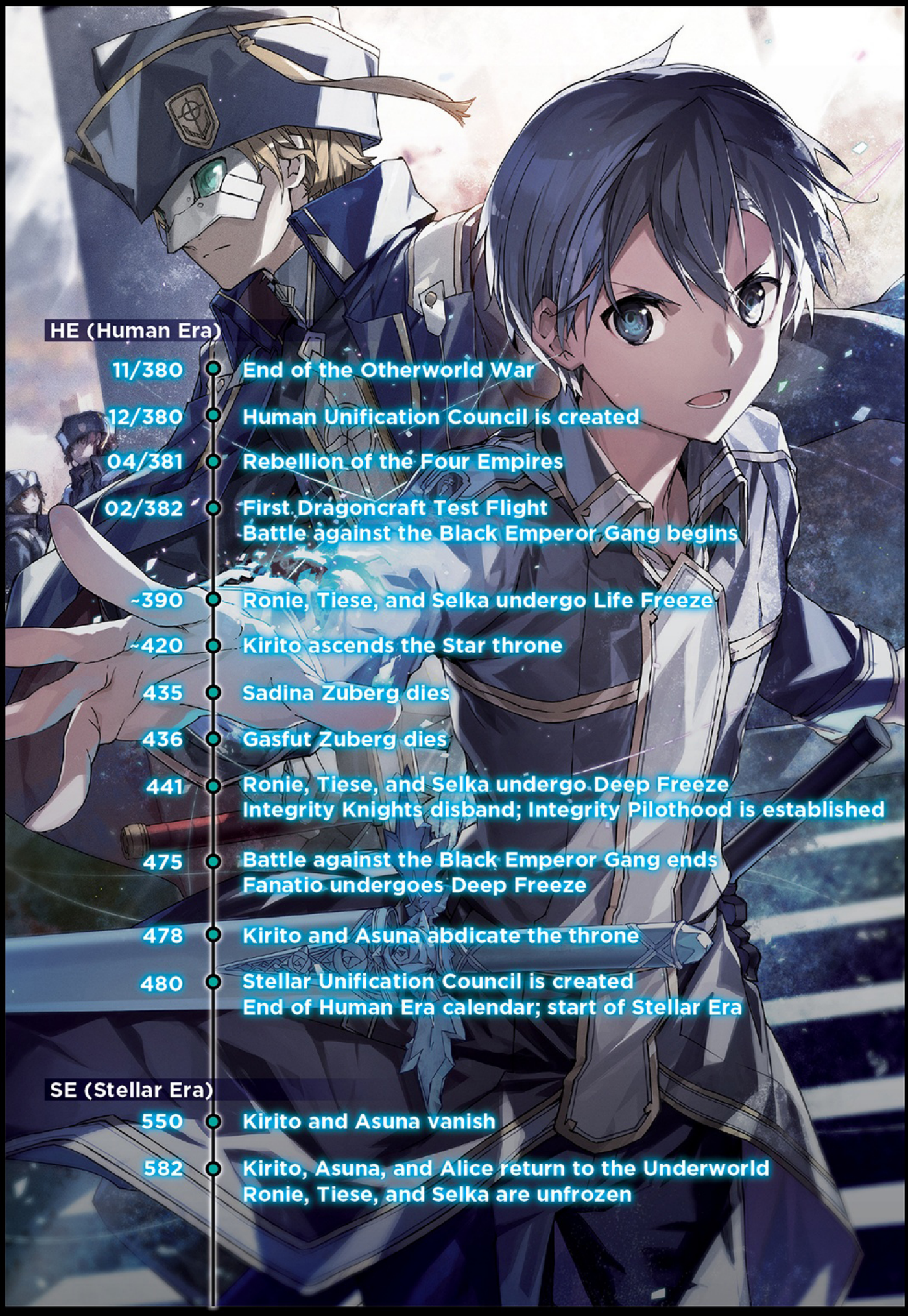

"…!"
"…I don't believe it… Is that you, Eugeo…?"
§ Selka
Alice's sister and the second commander of the sacred artificers brigade. Underwent the rite of petrification to go into an indefinite sleep, waiting to reunite with her sister two centuries later.
§ Tiese
The thirty-second Integrity Knight. Still holds a torch for the boy she met as a student who has the same green eyes as Eolyne.
§ Eolyne
Leader of the Integrity Pilots, the pinnacle of the Underworld's military. His mask is supposedly meant to protect his skin from the light of Solus…

Sinon
A young woman Kirito saved in *GGO*. She uses a musket as her main weapon in *Unital Ring*.
"Everybody, just run!"
Kirito
The boy who beat *SAO* and brought peace to the Underworld. Currently tackling *Unital Ring* with his companions.

"My name is Alice."
"I bear the Osmanthus Blade, a divine weapon, as proof that I am an Integrity Knight!!"
"Then I will turn you *and* that sword into ash!!"
§ Alice
The thirtieth Integrity Knight and the world's first true bottom-up artificial intelligence. Even two centuries later, she is revered in the Underworld as the Osmanthus Knight.

UNDERWORLD CHRONOLOGY

A list of never-before-revealed events that happened in the Underworld, from the Moon Cradle arc until now.



HE (Human Era)

- **11/380** — End of the Otherworld War
- **12/380** — Human Unification Council is created
- **04/381** — Rebellion of the Four Empires
- **02/382** — First Dragoncraft Test Flight
  Battle against the Black Emperor Gang begins
- **~390** — Ronie, Tiese, and Selka undergo Life Freeze
- **~420** — Kirito ascends the Star throne
- **435** — Sadina Zuberg dies
- **436** — Gasfut Zuberg dies
- **441** — Ronie, Tiese, and Selka undergo Deep Freeze
  Integrity Knights disband; Integrity Pilothood is established
- **475** — Battle against the Black Emperor Gang ends
  Fanatio undergoes Deep Freeze
- **478** — Kirito and Asuna abdicate the throne
- **480** — Stellar Unification Council is created
  End of Human Era calendar; start of Stellar Era

SE (Stellar Era)

- **550** — Kirito and Asuna vanish
- **582** — Kirito, Asuna, and Alice return to the Underworld
  Ronie, Tiese, and Selka are unfrozen

VOLUME 27

Reki Kawahara

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NEW YORK

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SWORD ART ONLINE, Volume 27: UNITAL RING VI
REKI KAWAHARA

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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

“THIS MIGHT BE A GAME, BUT IT’S NOT SOMETHING YOU PLAY.”

—Akihiko Kayaba, *Sword Art Online* programmer

Reki Kawahara

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1

Maple-red eyes, wide with unfathomable shock and disbelief.

Jade-green eyes, narrowed with suspicion behind a white leather mask.

Trapped between these opposing stares, I could only hold my breath apprehensively.

I should have anticipated this. Tiese Schtrinen Thirty-Two was awakening from a 140 year slumber, but ever since she had been Eugeo's page at the North Centoria Imperial Swordcraft Academy, she had pined for him. Her grief at learning of Eugeo's death during the Otherworld War was so great and so sharp that it had even penetrated into the depths of my mind while I was locked in a vegetative state.

After the war, Tiese and Ronie were named Integrity Knights, had children in their twenties, then underwent the art of life-freezing to preserve their youth, and were finally put to sleep in their mid-seventies with the Deep Freeze art—from what I was told. Even after all this time, however, it seemed likely that Tiese's flame for Eugeo had never truly gone out.

Which is why she noticed, on her very first glimpse, that the current-day leader of the Integrity Pilots, Eolyne Herlentz, was unbelievably similar in appearance to Eugeo. Even if more than half his face was hidden by a white leather mask.

A few seconds later, Ronie noticed what was wrong with Tiese, too. She followed her friend's gaze, noticed Eolyne—and sucked in a sharp gasp of breath. The sword whose point she'd been holding against the ground slipped out of her hands and fell over.

But it was neither Tiese nor Ronie who finally broke the tense silence.

"…I don't believe it…Is that you, Eugeo…?"

That voice, frail and trembling with emotion, belonged to a girl in a white robe standing next to Alice: Alice's beloved sister, Selka Zuberg.

The reason Asuna, Alice, and I were currently revisiting the Underworld had all started with a comment I had made to Alice after I'd awakened in Rath's Roppongi office two months ago:

Alice, your sister, Selka, chose to go into deep freeze to wait for your return. She's still slumbering now, atop that hill on the eightieth floor of Central Cathedral.

At present, I had no memory of this. That statement had supposedly come from Star King Kirito, who ruled the Underworld for a hundred years after the Otherworld War. I still had no primary memory of being the Star King, and the whole thing struck me as more than a little fishy, but I didn't think he would outright lie to Alice.

So we visited the Underworld once again to bring Selka back, reached Central Cathedral after many challenges, and found the petrified Selka, Ronie, and Tiese in the Cloudtop Garden on the eightieth floor. To undo the Deep Freeze art they were under, I had to travel with Eolyne on the cathedral's hidden dragoncraft, the X'rphan Mk. 13, to the planet Admina, where we acquired the means to de-petrify them after a very unexpected adventure.

From there, we rushed back to the planet Cardina, handed Alice the liquid solution, and had her awaken Selka first. Once the sisters were reunited at last in a loving embrace, I had thought that all would be well…

"Eugeo…you're alive…?" Selka asked, stumbling step after step toward Eolyne. Tiese and Ronie were frozen still, as though they'd fallen back under the Deep Freeze art.

The commander of the Integrity Pilots looked to me uncertainly for help. On his left, Stica and Laurannei had their pilot's caps pulled low over their faces, but Eolyne, like me, was still wearing his pilot suit, which left his flaxen hair exposed and a bit unkempt.

The sight of that hair, the exact same color and texture as Eugeo's, left me momentarily unable to know what to say to Selka. Neither Asuna nor Alice moved.

Another tense silence followed.

It was broken by an unexpected screeching sound.

"Kyuu! Kyu-kyuruuuu!"

A little brown blob was tumbling—literally, tumbling—over the grass toward us. At six feet away, it leaped high into the air and into Ronie's arms.

"*Kyuru! Kyurururu!*" squealed the little creature—Natsu, the long-eared wetrat. It swung its long ears around and buried its muzzle in Ronie's cheek.

"…Natsu!" she exclaimed, her voice weak. She clutched at the rodent, which continued to squeal and squeak with excitement.

That sound overlapped with the soft crunch of feet on grass. Climbing the hillside was the girl who had previously controlled the levitating platform, Airy Trume. She stopped in front of Selka, bowed deeply, and announced, "It is good to see you again, Lady Selka." Then she turned on her heel and continued. "Lady Tiese, Lady Ronie, I am most delighted to see you once more."

The sound of that gentle voice managed to bring a bit of life back to Selka, who appeared to be having an out-of-body experience. She blinked a few times, until her eyes focused on Airy's face, and then she smiled.

"Airy, how many times must I tell you that there's no need to call me 'Lady'?"

It was almost as though it had been less time since their reunion for Selka, I thought, before realizing that of *course* it seemed that way. Selka's fluctlight had been completely inactive while she was frozen, so from her perspective, it had only been a few days since she'd last seen Airy, if not a few hours.

Selka approached Airy and gave her a firm hug. "I'm so glad to see you well, Airy. What year of the Stellar Era is this?"

"It is December 7th, 582, Lady Selka."

"The year 582…"

It had been 140 years since Selka was frozen here. The truth of this stunned her, but her only outward reaction was a brief widening of her eyes. She looked around the group—to Tiese, Ronie, Natsu, Asuna, me, Stica, and then Laurannei—before returning to Eolyne at last.

Before she could say anything, Airy whispered, "Lady Selka, that man is not Eugeo."

"……But…"

I couldn’t blame her for being unable to accept it at first. They were just too identical for Eolyne to be a totally different person. It wasn’t just his hair and face, either; his build, posture, and even manner were similar to Eugeo’s.

In my two recent dives to the Underworld, I had spent a lot of time with Eolyne, so I knew that not every facet of him was identical to Eugeo. He had a cynical smile, a mysterious aloofness, and a sickly constitution, none of which described Eugeo. But even still, it felt as though his soul—the shape of his fluctlight, if you wanted to call it that—was too close to Eugeo’s to be a coincidence.

And yet, when Airy interacted with Eolyne, she did not seem surprised at all. Either she knew something about him, or she could see something that was invisible to me.

“He is the commander of the Integrity Pilots, Eolyne Herlentz,” Airy explained to Ronie and Tiese.

“Herlentz,” murmured Ronie, who was standing at my side. She took a few steps toward Airy with Natsu in her arms and asked, “Then he’s Berche’s…?”

“Yes. If Lord Berche was the second-generation head of the Herlentz family, then Eolyne would be the second son of the seventh-generation head.”

“The son of the seventh…,” Ronie repeated, blinking in surprise.

I started counting in my head. So the first head of the family was Bercouli Herlentz, whose son was Berche Herlentz, whose great-grandson’s son’s son was Orvas Herlentz, and Eolyne was *his* son—foster son, technically. Eight generations in two hundred years sounded like a lot to me, but marriages and childbirth happened earlier here than in the real world, so it made sense that the generations would pass quickly. Distantly, I recalled that Stica and Laurannei were supposed to be the seventh generation after Tiese and Ronie, too.

By that point, Tiese seemed to have accepted that Eolyne was not actually Eugeo. She picked up the sword that had toppled to the ground near her feet, placed it in the sheath on the inside of her white robe, and moved over to Airy.

“…You’ve been watching over us in the same place this whole

time, haven't you, Airy? Thank you…"

She embraced the girl, then turned in my direction. Her eyes were a lot like Stica's, but with an ever so slightly deeper coloring. They burned with purpose.

"Kirito…Excuse me—Your Majesty. I, Tiese Schtrinen Thirty-Two, hereby return to my knight's post," she announced formally. Ronie quickly lifted Natsu to her shoulder and picked up her sword. She sheathed it as well, then trotted over to line up next to Tiese.

"Likewise, Ronie Arabel Thirty-Three has returned to active duty!"

She placed her right fist against her chest and her left hand on her sword pommel in the Integrity Knight's official salute. My first instinct was to admire the way they'd grown and become so adult…and then I realized the situation and quickly lifted my hands.

"Uh, n-no, wait, listen…I hate to disappoint you," I rushed to get out, glancing over at Asuna before telling them the truth, "but I'm not the Star King anymore."

"Wha—?" Ronie and Tiese exclaimed in shocked unison.

I was just wondering how I would explain the situation to them when the sound of countless bells ringing came through the openings placed high in the walls. "Oh, crap," I muttered.

In the real world, it was Saturday, October 3rd, so I didn't have school. But as a condition for getting to dive into the Underworld, Dr. Rinko Koujiro had told me that I would have to log out using the gesture command by five o'clock. If I didn't, she would force-eject me by 5:10. That melody was the five o'clock bell.

"Ronie, Tiese, Selka, I'm sorry. Asuna, Alice, and I only have ten more minutes here," I said.

"Wh-what do you mean…?" asked a wide-eyed Ronie.

As quickly as I could, I explained, "We're currently divi—er, temporarily present in the Underworld. Our time limit is only until 5:10, and if we don't leave for the real world by then, we'll be pulled out by force."

"Wh-why are you under such a limitation?" Tiese asked.

Unfortunately, as the former Star King, I couldn't give her an excuse as undignified as *Because I have homework* or *Because*

my mom will scold me.

"Well, there are a variety of reasons…but there's something more important that I need to explain to you now," I said, and practically slid over the grass to where Stica, Laurannei, and Eolyne stood together. "Airy's already introduced Eolyne to you. First of all, this is Integrity Pilot Stica Schtrinen. Yes, that's *pilot*, as in pilot of a dragoncraft."

I pointed out Stica, and Tiese remarked, "What?" with surprise.

Then I pointed to Stica's partner. "And this is Integrity Pilot Laurannei Arabel."

"What?" Ronie remarked in the same tone of voice.

Calling out the two girls by name finally broke them out of their apparent paralysis. Awkwardly, they doffed their pilot's caps.

Ronie rushed over to Laurannei, and Tiese to Stica. Once they were face-to-face, it was clear that Ronie and Tiese were somewhat taller and looked older, but the resemblance between each pair was so great that it seemed impossible they could be six generations apart.

I wonder what it feels like to meet your distant ancestors…or descendants, I wondered idly. Then I belatedly realized that for Ronie and Tiese, this encounter might not actually be a happy thing.

Stica's and Laurannei's existence indicated that Tiese's and Ronie's children were no longer alive—unless their life had been suspended as well.

But outwardly, at least, Ronie and Tiese showed no sorrow, and they embraced their descendants. Laurannei and Stica hesitantly lifted their hands around the backs of their ancestors.

This embrace lingered, but I was patient. Eventually, the four let go and turned toward me.

"Your Majes—I mean, Kirito. What was the important thing you needed to tell us?" Ronie prompted.

With the occasional bit of help from Eolyne, I explained the peculiar circumstances surrounding the Integrity Pilothood at the moment.

It started with Stica and Laurannei being attacked by the Abyssal Horror while on their dragoncraft and continued through the mysterious base on Admina and the cruel experiment being

waged there. Even my abbreviated version of the story took a full five minutes to tell. There was probably less than a minute before Asuna, Alice, and I were going to be yanked out.

In all honesty, I would rather have stayed in the Underworld to talk to my old friends to my heart's content. But I had very nearly destroyed my fluctlight entirely during the Otherworld War, and even though I was here on request from Seijirou Kikuoka, my parents had to be concerned about me continuing to stay involved in Rath's business. The least I could do was come back home on time for them.

"Ronie, Tiese, Selka, I'm sorry to do this just after you woke up…but could you help Eolyne and the girls with this? I'll be back as soon as I can," I said, making my request as a friend, not as the Star King. Thankfully, they firmly accepted.

"Of course, Kirito!" said Ronie.

"We can handle this!" added Tiese.

"Just make sure you come back soon!" Selka chimed in.

And then, just as I had felt before, a sensation came over me like my mind being ripped out of my body. Everything I was seeing was whisked rapidly away, the light leaving rainbow trails.

Even when I was the Star King and she was the commander of the sacred artificers brigade, Selka didn't change the way she talked to me, I realized, my last thought before I departed the Underworld.

2

My eyes fluttered open, revealing a metallic ceiling with panel lighting kept on low output.

It was the STL room at Rath's Roppongi office. The Soul Translator's headblock was already opened, rather than enclosed around my head like usual.

Slowly, gently, I sat up from the gel bed. Nearby, I could see Alice in her uniform, resting on a makeshift reclining chair. She hadn't fully awakened yet; her eyes were shut, and she was not stirring.

Past her was the other STL table, where Asuna, dressed in the special gown for full-dive use, lifted her arms and stretched. When she noticed me looking at her, she grinned guiltily and murmured, "Good job in there, Kirito."

"Same to you, Asuna."

I got down from the bed, grabbed a bottle of mineral water from the wheeled cart along the wall, and took it back to Asuna. I loosened the cap and handed it to her, which she thanked me for and then proceeded to gulp down.

The sight of her drinking made me suddenly, acutely aware of my own thirst. Looking back at the day, I had left home at five in the morning and started my dive into the Underworld after seven, so I hadn't had a bite to eat or a drop to drink for ten whole hours. Dr. Koujiro had given us that hard deadline because staying in an unbroken dive for any longer would require an IV for fluids.

I opened another bottle and drank nearly half of it in one go before pulling away for air. With my thirst taken care of, the next thing to make itself known was my hunger; unfortunately, there was no food on the cart, as it wasn't allowed in the room.

It was times like this that I envied Alice's mechanical body. She didn't need food or water, although she surely had plenty of

physical problems that I didn't know about instead.

While these ideas and more trickled through my head, I reached down for my bag on the bottom tray of the cart and took out my phone. The moment the facial recognition system turned the screen on, Yui appeared on it.

"Papa, Mama, you're done with your long dive!"

"Thanks for waiting for us, Yui," I replied, and pointed the phone at Asuna. She smiled and waved. "Thank you for keeping watch for us, Yui. No problems, I hope?"

"That's right. There were no attempts to hack Rath's internal network. And no suspicious people or objects turned up on the security cameras."

"I'm glad. We were able to relax and focus on our dive thanks to you, Yui."

"*Eh-heh-heh*," she giggled. "*Well, I'm going to return to* Unital Ring *now. I'll talk to you later, Papa and Mama!*"

"Say hi to everyone for us," I said, turning the screen back to me.

Yui replied, "*I will!*" and vanished.

Once my phone was back in the bag, I had a sudden thought, and turned to the reclining chair. Alice's eyes were still closed. *We should have logged out at the same time*, I thought apprehensively.

Asuna was clearly thinking the same thing. "She's not waking up yet?"

"Yeah…it's been nearly three minutes. I wonder if there was connection trouble…"

"I don't suppose there's any point to shaking her," Asuna said, but got up from the bed and walked toward the reclining chair anyway. Just before her outstretched hand touched Alice's shoulder, however, the sound of the sliding door's motors interrupted her.

The figure of Dr. Koujiro, white lab coat and all, entered the room—along with one other person.

"Kirigaya, Asuna, welcome back. Have you rehydrated yet?" she asked.

I held up the bottle of water in my hand. "Yeah. I'm sorry that I couldn't log out before five o'clock, though."

"That's what happened the last time. I had a feeling." She shrugged.

"Rinko," Asuna said, "Alice hasn't woken up yet. Did something happen…?"

"Oh, it's not that. Since the three of you didn't come back by five o'clock, I figured that something important was happening in there, so he and I decided that we should allow her to continue the dive," Dr. Koujiro said, throwing a glance over her left shoulder.

Standing behind her was a tall man wearing the stylish combination of a cool linen jacket and banded collar shirt, plus rimless glasses with slightly tinted lenses. Every time I met him, he seemed to have a wildly different style, but while he always seemed nice at first, that mysterious smile never changed.

"Heya, Mr. Kikuoka. What are you doing here?" I asked.

Seijirou Kikuoka—who was sometimes a member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, sometimes part of the Self-Defense Force, but actually something even more mysterious than that—went from a smile to a grimace. "Come on, I'm the founder of Rath. It shouldn't be that surprising that I'd be here."

"From what I hear, you delegated the public role to Rinko and just mooch around all the time instead."

"Now, *mooch* is such a dirty word…," Kikuoka protested, spreading his hands theatrically.

Asuna gave him a little bow. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Kikuoka."

"Ah yes. What's it been, about two months? I'm glad you're looking well."

"Thank you. How has your recovery been, Mr. Kikuoka?"

"I got the all clear quite a while back. The only thing left is some scarring."

While it sounded like a friendly back-and-forth, I could sense a kind of nervous tension beneath their words. Asuna once said that she thought Kikuoka belonged to a category "between good and not-so-good people." And Kikuoka seemed to be slightly defensive, either because he felt guilty about continuing to get us into messes or for some other reason I wasn't privy to.

At least this was the real world, where Asuna couldn't physically string Kikuoka up by various body parts, I thought ominously.

Dr. Koujiro clapped her hands briskly. "Now, let's get you two ready to go home. Your families will worry if you're too late returning."

"Uh…don't you want to hear about our dive?" I asked.

She glanced at the reclining chair. "I'll hear about it from Alice later. I'm sorry to burden you while you're tired after the long dive, but will you tell your story to Lieutenant—er, excuse me, to Mr. Kikuoka?"

"That's fine, but it'll take a lot longer than two or three minutes."

"No worries," stated Kikuoka, dangling a car key between his fingers. "I'll be driving you and Asuna home, so we'll have time in the car to talk. I've got some things to ask, too."

"To ask, huh…?"

I gave him a suspicious glare, hoping he wasn't about to dump more work on my lap. Kikuoka easily brushed aside the look and headed for the door.

"Once you're done dressing and all that, take the elevator down to the garage on the second basement floor. See you there."

The door slid open, then closed again.

Asuna turned back toward us and asked Dr. Koujiro quietly, "What is Mr. Kikuoka's status now? On paper, did he still die on the *Ocean Turtle*?"

I had asked the exact same question before the dive this morning. Dr. Koujiro had brushed me off by saying I should ask him myself, but I hoped that maybe this time she would answer seriously.

"Well, I could tell you, but I think you'll assume I'm just joking to get you off my back…"

"I won't assume that!" Asuna claimed.

The doctor gave me a look of emphasis before saying, "Reizaburou Kikuoka."

"Huh?" Asuna and I said in unison. I shared a look with Asuna, then asked, "Wh-who is that…?"

"Seijirou's twin brother."

"…Mr. Kikuoka has a brother…? So is he borrowing his identity, then?" Asuna wondered aloud.

But Dr. Koujiro just looked as exasperated as she had ten hours ago and shook her head. "No, he doesn't exist. Higa modified a municipal registry, the regional bureau's duplicate registry, and the national census to create a brother for him out of thin air."

"…"

We were speechless. There were so many questions to ask—*How did he do that? Isn't that a crime?*—but it seemed pointless to even bother.

Eventually, Asuna simply stated, "Well, I'll get changed," and walked behind a screen set up in the corner of the room. In less than a minute, she had changed from her diving gown into her regular clothes and returned. I had merely taken off my top layer to dive, so I didn't need to change anything.

"Um…if possible, I'd like it if Alice could spend the night over there," I suggested.

Dr. Koujiro nodded. "That was my plan. Make sure you get good sleep tonight, you two."

"Thank you. I will."

"Me too. Good-bye," added Asuna, bowing. I bowed as well, then followed her out of the STL room.

We took the elevator down to the garage and emerged to see a car waiting for us. It was a midsize sedan in an inconspicuous color and style. I peered through the side window at the driver's seat, where Kikuoka noticed me and pointed out the back seat on his left.

I opened the door and got in. I would have preferred to go ladies first, but Asuna was going to be dropped off before me, which would make getting out on the left side annoying.

Asuna got in after me and closed the door, which made a satisfying, heavy *bumf*. The logo on the steering wheel was from a Swedish manufacturer I recognized. As far as foreign cars went, this was clearly the kind that was unassuming but high-quality.

"Thanks for waiting," I said from the back seat. "Knowing you, I was expecting a way sketchier-looking car."

Kikuoka chuckled. "And I *do* drive a much sketchier car when

I'm on my own time. But this is a Rath company car."

"Oh, I see…"

This must have been Rinko's choice, then, I imagined as I clicked the seat belt in. After confirming that Asuna had done the same, I said, "All right, take us away."

"Thank you for the ride," Asuna added.

Kikuoka put his hands on the wheel and said dryly, "All righty, then." With a faint purr, the engine came to life. Despite being midsize, the nearly two-ton car hardly vibrated at all as it smoothly rolled forward. It reminded me of the heat-element mechamobile I rode in the Underworld.

The electric vehicle easily climbed the steep slope of the garage exit, then turned onto Art Museum Road and picked up speed. From here to Asuna's home in Miyasaka, Setagaya Ward, it would take twenty minutes on Route 246—well, at this time of day, more like thirty.

Even that probably wouldn't be enough time to relate all the information we'd gleaned from today's dive, but I didn't need to tell Kikuoka everything. He had asked me to identify the person who'd used the Seed conversion function to break into the Underworld. He didn't need to know about Eolyne's family situation, or the full recounting of how we'd unfrozen Selka and the others.

And yet we still had nothing that would connect to the actual intruder, I noted regretfully. Nevertheless, I busied myself trying to construct a mental synopsis of what had happened.

"Kirito, there's a box on the passenger seat. Would you open it for me?" Kikuoka asked. Surprised, I glanced over the center console to the seat next to him. There was indeed a plain paper box, larger than a shoebox, resting on it. I reached over to pick it up and placed it on the back seat between Asuna and me.

If it were wrapped, I might've thought it was a three-day-late birthday present for Asuna, but there wasn't so much as a single ribbon on it. Instead, someone had written *Test 4* on it in black marker. The two of us shared a look, then I lifted the lid so we could see inside.

"Wha—?!"

"Whoa!!"

The contents were shocking.

Curled up in the midst of a ton of cushioning material was a kitten that couldn't have been more than a few months old.

"Don't put a cat in a box like this!" I snapped, reaching in with both hands to pick up the soft gray kitten. Just as quickly, I hunched in surprise. The kitten's body was completely cold and hard. Just before I could shriek and let go, I realized that it wasn't actually a corpse. For one thing, it was too heavy for a kitten this size, and there was something odd and wrong about the shape of its joints.

"Is this…fake?" I muttered.

Asuna was similarly in awe. She reached out timidly to touch the kitten's back. "Oh…you're right. What is this, Mr. Kikuoka?"

"A cat-type robot from the future," he replied sardonically, referencing a certain famous character. "Just kidding. There's a button under its right flank. Press and hold it."

I brushed under the joint of the front right leg and found a round object poking out. Like he said, I pushed it in for a few seconds.

Out of nowhere, the kitten shook. Its closed eyes shot open, and it looked right at me.

"*Meowww*," it cried adorably, but with a hint of protest. I hurriedly knocked the empty box onto the floor and lowered the kitten toward the seat between Asuna and me. It twisted and hopped off my hands onto the seat, where it stretched in a very natural motion, then looked up at Asuna.

"*Mewww*," it mewled, clearly sucking up to her. Asuna's eyes lit up. She scratched the kitten under its chin. The cat enjoyed it for a bit, then hopped onto Asuna's lap and curled up. It even began to purr, just like a real cat.

I watched it for several seconds before leaning toward the headrest in front of me to ask, "Mr. Kikuoka, is that really a robot…?"

"You powered it on, didn't you? It's a pet robot test model, using the same CNT actuators—the artificial muscles—from Alice's mechanical body. Higa put a lot of work into that one."

"Really…No wonder I haven't seen him in a while. He musta been workin' on this thing," I commented, then felt embarrassed

that I had slipped into Higa's way of speaking for a second. I added, "S-so is this his hobby? Or yours?"

"Come on, now. An incredible amount of money went into developing that model. Dr. Koujiro would beat me to a pulp if I were spending that kind of money on a 'hobby,'" Kikuoka said uncomfortably. He turned the wheel right, and our electric vehicle smoothly pulled through an intersection in Nishiazabu.

As I expected, Roppongi Street was crowded on a Saturday evening, but not so much that we came to a stop. There was a large multidisplay nav map in the front that showed the traffic around Shibuya Station clearing up. We would be arriving at Asuna's house by six after all.

But back to the robot kitten. Its fur was so realistic, it didn't seem like it could be artificial. "If this isn't for a hobby," I murmured, "then what is it for…?"

"Are you turning it into a commercial product?" asked Asuna, stroking the kitten. My mouth fell open. *Surely that won't be it*, I thought, but our driver had nothing but praise for her.

"Very perceptive of you, Asuna. That's right…We're aiming to bring it to market as soon as next year."

"Whaaat? Rath's going to *sell* these?" I asked, aghast.

Kikuoka rolled his eyes imperceptibly. "Of course not. We're only doing the planning and development. The production and distribution will need to be done by a major manufacturer, a company like RCT Progress."

My eyes snapped over to Asuna at the mention of that name. The daughter of RCT Progress's former CEO just smiled and said coolly, "RCT Progress has sold pet robots in the past, so I'm sure they would have an interest. The negotiations would be very difficult, though."

"Ha-ha-ha, I suppose they would be. But I'm confident that our robotic technology is the best in the world. One look at Yon-chan there will convince anyone of that."

"Yon-chan…?"

Asuna and I shared another look. Rath's robots started with Ichiemon and Niemon, the heroes of the *Ocean Turtle*, so I had to assume that "Yon-chan" was a nickname for Test Prototype Four here, as indicated by the writing on the box. Which uncreative bore was naming these poor robots?

No, don't bother trying to figure that out, I told myself, and reached out to pet the curled-up Yon-chan on Asuna's lap. When I had first touched it, the body was cold enough that I thought the cat was dead, but now that its machinery and battery were active, it felt slightly warm to the touch.

"Yeah, you could probably sell a lot of these…," I whispered to myself.

Kikuoka overheard and said delightedly, "Right? And if Rath can acquire multiple sources of stable, independent income like this, we'll have a better time counteracting the faction that wants the Underworld project scrapped."

Well, if that was going to be the case, then the seemingly out-of-nowhere pet-robot development plan had earned my support. I looked at Kikuoka's face through the rearview mirror and asked, "If the thing you wanted to talk to us about was this pet robot, it probably means you want us to do something for you, doesn't it? What is it this time?"

In the mirror, I saw him grin.

"I'm glad you're so perceptive."

"That's funny—I usually hear the opposite."

"The thing is…Yon-chan there has pretty much hit all our goals on hardware. It's the software that we're having trouble with."

"Really…?" Asuna asked, surprised. "But it seems so lifelike to me."

I had to agree. The way it stretched and hopped onto Asuna's lap was utterly believable. But Kikuoka just shook his head.

"Its reactions to human contact are fine. The problem is its spontaneous actions…If you program what to do from A to Z, the robot's got no personality, and if you put AI in charge, it eventually stops acting like a real cat. Before we reset its learning data yesterday, Yon-chan was attempting to walk around on two legs."

"……There might actually be some demand for that, though," I muttered under my breath. "So what do you want *us* to do? I can't imagine there's anything we can do that Higa can't."

"Oh, I'm not asking you to *do* anything about Yon-chan. It's just, er…Are there cats in the Underworld, too, Kirito?"

"Huh? Well, yeah…"

"Are they actually catlike?"

"They don't walk around on two legs or bark like dogs, if that's what you're asking," I said, then realized what he was getting at. "Wait…are you suggesting I bring a cat out of the Underworld with me?"

"Bingo," he said, grinning again. In rapid-fire fashion, he stated, "At the time we started running the Underworld simulation, animals were just a simple program included in The Seed Package, but after five centuries of learning on internal time, they should have gained an advanced and highly polished complexity, I believe. I just can't imagine how exactly the

simulation has managed to make catlike cats and doglike dogs."

His comments reminded me of Natsu, Airy's long-eared wetrat friend. It wasn't a cat, but a rat—more like a rabbit, even. But the way it grabbed nuts with both hands and chewed on them, then flipped around and squealed felt utterly natural, without a hint of artifice. Natsu was probably a special individual, but there were likely cats somewhere in that world that had reached the same level of advancement.

Kikuoka was presumably thinking that if I could export such a cat from the Underworld and load it onto Yon-chan's body, the result would be an extremely advanced and believable robot cat. But…

"You make it sound like 'bringing out a cat' is simple. I assume you haven't forgotten, Mr. Kikuoka—the Underworld servers are on the *Ocean Turtle* across the sea. I could dive from the Roppongi office, but I wouldn't be able to bring a single rock back with me, much less a cat."

"I haven't forgotten that, of course," Kikuoka said smoothly, pressing on the accelerator. We'd made it past the Shibuya Station vicinity, and the road ahead was open. The car sped up quickly, rushing up Route 246.

Once we were at speed, Kikuoka explained, "This is still only in the theoretical stage, but with Alice's help, there is a possibility that we might be able to export small amounts of data from the Underworld. It just requires the use of the system console from the inside."

"With Alice's help…?" I repeated, baffled yet again.

Thankfully, Asuna's sharp intuition came to my rescue. "Are you saying you mean to use Alice's lightcube for storage?" she asked a bit reproachfully. I couldn't blame her. While the idea was a clever solution, it was also not something I could get behind.

"That's really pushing it, Mr. Kikuoka. Even assuming Alice's lightcube has the space to store something like that, if anything damages her fluctlight in the process of writing the cat's data, that harm is irrevocable," I said.

"Of course, of course." Kikuoka lifted his hands off the wheel briefly to make an apologetic prayer sign. He had clearly anticipated this reaction of ours. "We wouldn't use Alice's actual

lightcube. The cranial shell in her head still has some space for storing a lightcube, so we're looking into adding something like a supplemental memory bank there for her."

"…That still sounds risky to me. You're not thinking of ignoring Alice's will and performing some kind of twisted experimentation on her, are you?"

"Of course not. In fact, this whole thing got started at her request."

"Alice asked for this…?"

I was stunned. She had been in the real world for only two months. Why would she be requesting extra memory now?

Before I could ask, Kikuoka explained, "The reason Alice wanted it is not for me to say. You'll have to ask her yourself. Getting back to the main topic, the thing I wanted to ask you two to do for me is to search for a clever-looking cat on your next dive into the Underworld."

"We can certainly look for one," Asuna said, "but if we bring it out to the real world, then it vanishes from the Underworld, doesn't it? I would assume that its owner would be very sad."

That was a very characteristically thoughtful comment from Asuna, but Kikuoka just shook his head. "No, that won't happen. Underworlders with fluctlights cannot be brought to the real world without physically ejecting their lightcube from the Lightcube Cluster, but mobile objects like dogs and cats can simply be copied to regular media. Of course, the original would remain in the Underworld. It won't even realize that it's been copied," he said with a smirk. "The problem is that we still can't make that copy without going to the *Ocean Turtle*. But if we use the interior console and Alice's supplemental memory bank, we think we can extract the data right from Roppongi."

"…I see. Just one more question—if we do succeed in copying a cat's data from the Underworld, are you going to write it to Yon-chan here?"

I stared at the back of Kikuoka's head when he didn't respond and thought, *You've misjudged Asuna's sense of empathy, Mr. Kikuoka.* At the point that it jumped onto her lap so she could pet it, the Yon-chan in the car with us here became something Asuna wanted to protect and preserve.

But the former commander of Rath was a quick thinker. "Not quite. If you happen to find an appropriate cat program in the Underworld, we'll place it in Prototype Five, which is still in development. Since you're more likely to find an adult-sized cat, it'll cause issues if we put that mind in Yon-chan's kitten-sized body."

"And what will you do with Yon-chan? Scrap it?" I lobbed, but Kikuoka gracefully deflected the blow.

"No, no, it's still got room to develop, I think. On that topic, Asuna…would you like to keep Yon-chan and raise it?"

"Huh…? Me…?"

"You said that you don't have any pets at home, didn't you?"

"Yes…Because my family is often away, we wouldn't be able to take care of one…"

"But Yon-chan doesn't need to be fed or have its litter box cleaned. When there aren't any people around, it's designed to go into sleep mode and recharge. On the other hand, there's a high chance that it will continue to exhibit uncatlike behavior, but I'll leave it up to your judgment whether to reset its learning data. What do you say?"

"……"

Asuna stroked the sleeping kitten on her lap instead of answering. Even though it was only a robot, I could sense that she was feeling the pressure of being its potential owner and caretaker.

"Asuna, you don't have to—," I started to say, but she cut me off with a smile.

"Thank you, Kirito. I'm fine, though. I will take care of the cat for the time being, Mr. Kikuoka."

"Ah, that's wonderful. The manual and recharging pad are in the box. Also, this is still a company secret, so it would be great if you avoided showing Yon-chan to anyone outside the family."

"Understood."

I had to resist the urge to snap, *Oh, but showing her family is okay?* Asuna's dad was the former CEO of RCT Progress, and her brother, Kouichirou, was an executive at the company, as I understood it. Of course, Kikuoka would be considering that as well. In fact, maybe showing the cat to them was part of his

plan…

"Kirito, could you get the box?" Asuna asked, snapping me out of my thoughts. I reached down to put the paper box back on the seat. She apologized to the cat before pressing the switch to power it down and snuggling the curled-up robot kitten back into the box of packing material.

She popped the lid onto the box, then held the whole thing on her lap, smiling serenely. Seeing her reaction made me wonder if Yon-chan was actually just Kikuoka's elaborate version of a birthday present for Asuna. It would be tasteless of me to ask, though.

Somehow, the car was already off Route 246 and on Setagaya Road. The Yuuki home was just out of sight.

"You're probably tired, Asuna. Go to bed early tonight," I whispered to her.

She looked at me skeptically. "You're going in to check out how they're doing, though, right?"

"Well, yeah…"

"Then I'm going in, too. It sounds like a lot has happened."

"Okay. Well, don't stay up too late."

"Thanks, I won't," she said.

Just then, the car came to a stop, hazard lights blinking.

Asuna picked up the paper box, thanked Kikuoka for the ride, and got out. I moved over to the left seat so I could wave good-bye and watched her walk through the front gate of the house.

Once the sensor lights over the gate turned off, I faced forward again, leaning back against the leather seat. I clicked my seat belt and waited for the car to resume its drive.

From here to the Kirigaya home in Kawagoe, it would take at least an hour, even along the Kan-Etsu Expressway. The city lights shone dully on Kikuoka's cheek. I said, "I could have asked earlier, but are you really driving me all the way home? You must have better things to do."

"It's part of my job," he replied. For some reason, he pulled over to the side of the road and put on his hazard lights again. "Would you like to come sit in the front seat, Kirito?"

"…Well, sure, I guess…"

You could have asked me earlier, I thought, removing my seat

belt so that I could get out of the car, open the passenger door, and get into the front seat and buckled in again. We drove west along a two-lane road through what seemed for all the world like a quiet, normal neighborhood.

Eventually, the road intersected with Metropolitan Route 8 by Chitose-Funabashi Station. A right turn there, and we could take the Nerima Interchange all the way to the start of the Kan-Etsu Expressway.

Fortunately, Route 8 was surprisingly empty for this time of day. Once I sensed that Kikuoka was settling in, I kept my eyes on the road and said, "Once they connect up that outer loop, it'll make getting to and from downtown Kawagoe so much easier."

"Absolutely. But at the current pace, I think it'll take another five years."

"Five years…"

It was my choice of conversation topic, but I was already reduced to a stunned silence. I couldn't even imagine what I would be doing in 2031, five years from now.

Seemingly reading my mind, Kikuoka followed up with a question, like a kindly unc—er, cousin.

"By that time, you'll be twenty-two…no, three? Have you decided on your future plans?"

"……"

I'd told Asuna and my parents about my plans to get a job with Rath, and Dr. Koujiro had somehow figured it out on her own, but I didn't know if Kikuoka was aware. A careless answer might have unwanted consequences down the road, so I took a few seconds to consider.

"Well, I'd like to go to college."

"Ah, so you're not going the pro-gamer route."

"L-listen…"

To tell the truth, though, it wasn't such an absurd answer in this day and age. Even before full-diving came along, you had traditional gaming income sources like tournament prize money, streaming, and taking part in a pro team. And recently there were games like *Gun Gale Online* that allowed players to trade in-game currency for real money or earn virtual currency and tokens and the like.

Until my fourteenth birthday, there was a part of me that dreamed of being a pro gamer, too. But then…

"…I can't make it as a pro," I mumbled. I could sense Kikuoka's eyes on my profile.

"Why do you say that? Setting aside whether you actually *want* to, I think you've got professional-level talent in any full-dive game."

"You think too highly of me. Plus," I said, hesitating. Finally, I admitted, "I don't think I can reach that level of rabid fanaticism about an ordinary game anymore. I couldn't fight until I threatened to burn out my very life force like I did in Aincrad and the Underworld, even if I wanted to. If I can't reach that level of intensity, I don't have the right to compete as a pro."

Now it was Kikuoka's turn to sit in silence.

He took his left hand off the steering wheel and held it up in the air, but ultimately did not say anything, electing to put it back on the wheel. He sighed softly, so quietly that I wouldn't have heard it if the car had a combustion engine.

"…I see," he murmured quietly and gravely. "In that case…I guess this mission has been a painful one for you…I suppose it's brought up a lot of memories about what you experienced in the Underworld three months ago."

"Actually…well, it brought up a lot of stuff," I grumbled. That wasn't what I wanted to say. "The things that happened there weren't all bad. Besides, I was asking and asking Rinko if I could go back to the Underworld anyway."

"That's a relief to hear…but I'll take your words to heart, Kirito. Now, it pains me to have to ask you this right now, but…"

"Don't let it pain you. It's about the intruder, right?"

"Yeah. Did you find any leads?"

"None," I said, as simple as that.

Kikuoka froze for a few seconds. "Ah. I see. Well, the Underworld is the size of a continent, after all. It can't be easy to search for a single person there."

"These days, it's actually around the size of two whole planets," I corrected him. Over the next fifteen minutes, I explained the events of today's dive. By the time I was done, we had turned off Route 8 to Mejiro Street. There was a ramp ahead of us leading to

the Nerima Interchange.

Kikuoka drove up the hill and through the toll area, accelerating to sixty miles per hour. The electric car's torque pushed my back against the seat, but this was positively gentle compared to the sheer force of the X'rphan Mk. 13's max speed.

Once the car was cruising again, I peered at the info panel on the driver's side. The battery life was still more than 80 percent. He would easily be able to drop me off in Kawagoe and drive all the way back to Roppongi without needing a charge. Then I realized that it was Saturday, so he might just drive home instead.

"Hey, what area are you living in now?" I asked casually.

Distracted, Kikuoka replied, "Huh? Oh…in Shinonome."

"Shinonome…so, like, next to Ariake. Have you always been there?"

"No, only since I changed my name…Whoa, hey, anything more than that is top secret. If you want to know more, you have to join my syndicate," Kikuoka joked, coming back to his senses. "Kirito," he said seriously, "I just want to confirm a few things… First of all, is the Underworlders' inability to break rules or laws still unchanged, even two centuries later?"

"Yeah, I believe so."

I folded my fingers together and placed them between the back of my head and the headrest before explaining everything I knew about the topic.

"As usual, there isn't a single piece of litter to be found on the streets of Centoria, and the traffic was smooth and orderly. I got the feeling that the captains and directors and whatever of the local police were kind of pushy and pompous, so it's still not a utopia by any means."

"Uh-huh…And the current ruling body of the Underworld is the Stellar Unification Council? Are they maintaining the same level of control as the old Axiom Church did?"

"Hmm. Well, the Axiom Church and Administrator were basically stand-ins for God, so it might be different in nature. The Stellar Unification Council probably isn't worshipped or feared in the same way, but its control seems as firm as bedrock."

"And yet there's been sabotage of the Integrity Pilots—an arm of the Unification Council itself—and there's an unaffiliated base

on Admina where they were conducting illegal experiments?"

"Yeah, that's the thing…"

I lowered my hands to rest on my chest this time. I thought back on the mysterious base we found on Admina and the enigmatic and beautiful Tohkouga Istar, dressed in black and called Your Excellency—and that was when I realized that I'd failed to pass along a crucial piece of information, or more like a theory, to Kikuoka.

"Wait, sorry. Earlier I said I didn't have any leads on the intruder, but that's not true."

"Meaning?"

"This is just a supposition without any evidence behind it…but Eo…I mean, the commander of the Pilothood pointed out the possibility that the intruder from the real world might be connected to the sabotage of the Integrity Pilots."

"Ahhh…" Kikuoka tapped the steering wheel with the fingertips of his left hand. "That commander must have a very flexible mind," he exclaimed. "I did a lot of thinking about who the intruder might be, but I could only come up with foreign saboteurs or industrial spies after STL information."

"I feel like it's a logical leap, but the commander said that the God of Darkness, Vecta, who started the Otherworld War, was a real-worlder, so it's not out of the question that the same thing could happen again…"

"…I see. That's a good point. But…if so, that makes things even more complicated to untangle. If the intruder's goal isn't to gain access to the system console, but to interfere with the Underworld itself, it would suggest that they are very knowledgeable about the Underworld's history, terrain, and social structure. I have a hard time imagining such a human being really exists," Kikuoka muttered, half to himself.

"True," I agreed, but soon realized that it wasn't necessarily that simple. Rath's staff could use the STL in Roppongi to dive into the Underworld and gather information, for example. I didn't want to suspect people I'd met and was on good terms with, but the very man who had shot and wounded Kikuoka in the attack on the *Ocean Turtle* three months ago was a spy who had infiltrated Rath.

Of course, Kikuoka wouldn't have overlooked that possibility. If he had already ruled it out, he had to have had a very good reason for doing so.

I realized that my shoulders had seized up at some point, so I made a point to relax them and stared out the window to the west. The last bit of sunlight was nearly gone, and a few tiny stars were glimmering in the sky, lonely and weak.

Déjà vu hit me at that very moment. Long, long ago, it seemed, I had once gazed at the stars from a vehicle moving at a steady speed, just like this. Well, of course I had; our family went out for the evening all the time when I was a little kid. But in my vague memories, it wasn't Dad or Mom who was holding the steering wheel…

"Sun's going down earlier, isn't it?" Kikuoka said, drawing me out of my memories.

I blinked my recollections away and said, "Well, we're past the midpoint of fall now."

"Do you know what they call the day in the fall when the day and night are equal lengths, in English?" he asked suddenly. The question took me by surprise, but to my benefit, I had studied the names of that day in the fall and the spring, as well as the summer and winter solstices.

"It's the autumnal equinox," I said, with 98 percent confidence.

But Kikuoka made a *brr-brrr* buzzer sound.

"Wh-what…?"

"Sorry, but that's the equinox itself. The day we observe on the calendar is called Autumnal Equinox Day."

"Wh-what? That's a total technicality!"

"And if you fall for trick questions like that, you're never going to win at Rath's trivia night."

"…You have trivia nights?"

"You'll have to come to the next one," he said. I wasn't sure if he meant it or not.

Kikuoka drove a little faster. People said that electric vehicles weren't as good at high speed, but this one was handling sixty miles per hour without a hint of any unpleasant vibrations or noise. It was the polar opposite of my beloved two-stroke off-road bike, but this seemed pretty sweet in its own way.

I leaned back against the deluxe leather seat, listening to the faint road noise, and felt my eyelids getting heavier. But we weren't done talking. There was more to be exchanged about the infiltrator's identity…

"You can drift off to sleep," Kikuoka said without looking at me. But if I actually fell asleep now, I'd feel like a little kid taking a nap.

"No, I'm fine," I replied, trying hard to fight off sleep. But once my head was touching the headrest, it refused to pull off of it again.

Kikuoka must've done something to the computer system, because soft, slow jazz began to play quietly over the speakers. That was the clinching blow that sealed my fate, lulling my mind gently and slowly into darkness.

3

As she approached the front door, the smart-home system detected the phone in her bag and undid the three-part lock.

Asuna Yuuki adjusted the paper box in her left arm so that she could open the door with her right. Inside, the house was gloomy and quiet. According to the schedule when she checked it that morning, her father was out golfing and her mother was at the university, so neither would be home before nine o'clock, and her brother was on a trip to the Kansai area until the following day.

Previously, she hadn't thought anything of returning to an empty home, but she was starting to find it a lonely experience. That was strange, considering she might be leaving home in half a year—or maybe that was why she felt this way to begin with.

She stopped in the bathroom to wash her hands and face, then headed up the stairs. Once she was inside her room, the lights came on automatically, and the air-conditioning began to run. She put the box on the desk and exhaled.

Asuna would have liked to take the lid off immediately, but she used patience, putting together a change of clothes and heading downstairs to the bath. She had set up a timer before leaving Rath's office, so the tub was full and heated. There were times when the smart home felt like it was intruding into her business, but *this* was a feature she could appreciate.

First, she rinsed off the sweat of the day with the showerhead before moving to the tub. The feeling of the slightly too-hot water covering her skin up to her shoulders caused her to exclaim, "*Hahffff…*" in sheer delight.

The bath in the Yuuki family home was the maximum for a modern bath system: the 1822 model, meaning that it was 1.8 meters on the short side and 2.2 meters on the long, or 6 by 7 feet. That was nothing compared to the Great Bath in Central

Cathedral, of course—the Great Bath was 60 by 120 feet.

In subjective time, it had been just five hours ago that she had been taking in the bath experience with Alice, Airy, Stica, Laurannei, and Natsu, where she had thought, *If I get too used to this bath, I'm not going to be satisfied by my bath at home anymore*. But now she had to admit that there was a certain kind of relaxation you could get only in the bath in your own home.

Normally, she liked to drizzle aromatic oils into a lukewarm bath and have some cold drinking water and her Augma on hand, but there was no time for that today. She wrapped it up quickly, dried her hair, and performed some skin care, at which point it was six forty-five.

She ate a quick meal in the kitchen, brushed her teeth, and headed for her room.

Just in case, she checked that all the windows were shut and covered, then opened the box on her desk. She lifted the curled-up gray kitten from the packing material, placed it on a large cushion on the ground, and pushed the switch under its front right leg.

Awake once again, the kitten sat upright with its front paws neatly side by side, like an Egyptian statue. Its greenish eyes looked around the room. Ten seconds later, it hopped off the cushion to the floor, put a paw on Asuna's lap where she knelt on the ground, and pleaded, "*Mew, mew.*"

Based on its expression and sound, it seemed clear that it was complaining of hunger.

"Are you hungry, Yon-chan? Hang on a minute…"

She stood up, intending to go down to the kitchen to find something a kitten might like to eat—until she remembered that Yon-chan was a robot. She froze, uncertain of what to do. Thankfully, the answer was in Seijirou Kikuoka's notes.

Asuna went back to the desk and stuck her hands into the packing material, feeling around until she touched what felt like a board covered in plastic. She pulled out a blackboard about the size of a standard A4 piece of paper: the wireless charging pad.

She opened the plastic bag, hooked up the provided USB cable to the pad, then stuck the plug on the other end into the wall socket. After she placed it on the ground, the cat meowed and

curled up on the board.

It would probably keep sleeping until its battery was full again. Asuna brushed its fluffy fur and whispered, "We're going to be good friends, Yon-chan."

Honestly, she still wasn't in the mood to put her full trust in Seijirou Kikuoka. There was still a 1 percent chance that giving her this robot kitten was part of some plot of his. But at the very least, she was confident he was not the kind of slimeball who would use onboard mics and cameras to spy on her.

The plastic bag the charging pad came in also contained a folded piece of paper that seemed to be the manual. She skimmed through it until she could confirm that a full charge took about five hours to finish.

When Yon-chan wakes up, I want to introduce it to Yui, she thought, sitting on the bed.

There was a heaviness in her mind at the moment. She'd left the house at seven in the morning and been in a dive in the Underworld from nine to five, so some fatigue was natural, but there had been only one combat incident, and her actual body had been lying on a gel bed the entire time. Kazuto told her to go to bed early, but she could still be active for another three or four hours.

She picked up her AmuSphere from the rack on the side table and placed it over her head. Once the positioning and height of her pillow was agreeable to her, she lay down on the bed. The room automatically adjusted the ceiling lights to night mode.

Relaxing her entire body, she closed her eyes and stated, "Link Start."

Back in the world of *Unital Ring* for the first time in seventeen hours, Asuna took a look around the living room of the log cabin. But there was no sight of Yui, who had been online just two hours ago, nor any of her friends.

Next, she examined her own status.

Her HP was full, while her MP, TP, and SP were all near 80 percent. Her personal protection was her linen dress and Lisbeth's fine iron armor, while her weapon—a rapier—was made of a material two tiers higher: fine steel.

Compared to the Integrity Pilot uniform she borrowed in the Underworld, her clothes were very simple and rough to the touch, but that was nothing compared to the crude robes of grass fiber she'd made right after they were first sucked into this place.

The *UR* incident happened at five o'clock in the evening on September 27th, and it was currently seven o'clock on October 3rd, so six days and two hours had passed so far. The amazing thing was that it both felt like it was *already* six days and *only* six days.

At the time, she had assumed they'd be back in their proper place in The Seed Nexus in two or three days at the most, but now it seemed like that might never happen. The anomaly would continue to hold until someone reached the center of the world map as indicated in the initial announcement: the land revealed by the heavenly light.

Be that as it may, she was going to protect this log cabin as well as Kirito Town, better known as Ruis na Ríg.

With that oath in mind, she opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. The sun had long since gone down, leaving only the muted hint of indigo in the western sky, but the many torches lit around the area bathed the yard outside in orange firelight.

The yard, cramped with various crafting stations, was just as quiet as the house. But there were strange sounds of unrest coming from over the ten-foot-tall stone wall that surrounded the circular clearing. It was a buzzing as though huge crowds of people were milling around just on the other side of the wall, but that couldn't be right.

Suspicious, Asuna headed for the wooden gate on the south side of the wall to get out—but abruptly stopped short.

There was no gate. A huge door had stood there the last time she logged out, but now there was just a gray wall.

Surely she didn't get north and south mixed up. Asuna spun around, but it was still wall. The Seed program was almost spitefully stable, so there was no way that it suddenly bugged out and caused a gate but nothing else to vanish.

Now she was truly stumped. She cast around, looking for anything that would help her, and noticed something that hadn't been there before. On the west side of the yard, next to the

smelting furnace, was a towerlike stone structure. It was about as tall as the stone wall, with a single door at the base and a ladder on the left side that you could climb to the top.

She trotted over and considered whether to climb the ladder or open the door, opting eventually to climb. The ladder was made of wood and was firm and strong. It didn't so much as creak under Asuna's weight, even with all her gear equipped. Still, she climbed gingerly. The top of the tower was a little roof, four and a half feet to a side, with handrails all around, like a lookout.

Once she was up, Asuna held tight to the spiral pine handrail and went on tiptoe to see farther over the stone wall.

She gasped.

"Wha…?!"

The circular path surrounding the log cabin, which they called Inner Perimeter Road, was being traveled by dozens of people, some of who stood around in groups to chat. Unlike in other games, you couldn't bring up cursors by focusing on people in this world, so there was no in-game indicator to tell NPCs and players apart. But if she trusted her instincts and years of experience, these were all players.

It wasn't just the inner perimeter, either. Eight O'Clock Road to the southwest, the commercial district to the left of it, and even the Bashin dwelling area to the right were bustling with players. There were easily more than a hundred, just from what she could see. If the entirety of Ruis na Ríg was this busy, there could be three—no, more than five hundred people here. They'd had visitors come up from the Stiss Ruins to the south before, but even at the busiest, it was never more than fifty at a time.

Had Mutasina the witch come with another huge army while she, Kirito, and Alice were gone, and taken control of Ruis na Ríg after all? If so, where were her friends? Surely they couldn't all have been eliminated…

Gripped by the horror of the worst-case scenario, Asuna was startled to hear a familiar voice hail, "Hey, Asuna!"

She popped away from the handrail and looked down the ladder. On the ground and waving up at her was a girl in an apron: Lisbeth the blacksmith.

"Liz!"

Relieved, Asuna waved back. She turned around, grabbed the sides of the ladder, and carefully adjusted her grip to slide all the way down in one go. As soon as her feet touched ground, she spun around and asked, "What's with all the people in town?! Is everyone okay?! Where were you?!"

"Oh yeah, it's a surprise at first, huh?" Lisbeth said with a smirk. She pointed to the door at the base of the tower. "I came through here. We dug a tunnel underground, and it comes out in the Bashin area."

"A tunnel? But why…? And what happened to the gate that was here?"

"Hmm, I guess I gotta explain things in order…This might take a while, so let's sit down over there," Lisbeth said, pointing to the row of blacksmithing facilities where she conducted her business. She sat down on a round chair before an anvil, while Asuna took the garden bench across from it.

Recognizing that the camp wasn't in peril after all, Asuna still couldn't help but glance at Lisbeth's neck. Sure enough, her healthy egg-white skin did not bear the hideous black ring of the Noose of the Accursed, Mutasina's terrifying, multitarget suffocation spell.

Lisbeth didn't show any sign of noticing Asuna's attention. She opened her inventory and took out two faintly iridescent green cups. Next, she removed a leather waterskin and poured a dark-brown liquid into the cups.

"Here you go," she said. Asuna took the cup with both hands. It looked and felt like metal, but it was shockingly light.

"When did you learn to make stuff like this?" Asuna asked.

Lisbeth gave her a conspiratorial wink. "I'm improving by the day. Made these out of gilnaris hornet carapace."

"Hornet…You mean bees? This is made of bee carapace?!" Asuna exclaimed, pulling her face away from the cup.

Lisbeth cackled. "You're fine. I melted them down and turned them into gilnaris steel ingots. See? *Hornet* isn't even in the name anymore. No wonder those damn bees were so tough; their shell was literally made of metal."

"…'Damn bees'? Liz, were you fighting giant hornets?"

"Fighting wasn't even the half of it," Lisbeth said cryptically

before lifting the metallic green cup to her lips. Asuna hesitantly did the same; there was no funny smell. If anything, the liquid had a scent that reminded her of black tea.

She took a sip and discovered a taste like several kinds of heavy tea flavored with fruit. *If only it were ice cold*, she thought. Even at room temperature, however, it was far and away better than the tea Asuna had made by brewing the random leaves sitting around. It even had a mild MP recovery effect.

"Did you make the tea, too?"

"Oh, of course…not. The Patter sell this stuff."

"Oooh…So they sell tea now, on top of the preserved food?"

If it's this good and there are that many customers around, it's bound to fly off the shelves, she thought before coming back around to her original question.

"So why *are* there so many people here?" she asked, prompting Lisbeth to tell her everything that had happened that day.

Lisbeth explained about going with Silica and Klein into the northern Zelletelio Forest to search for a spot to harvest ore.

She described the swarm of gigantic gilnaris hornets and their discovery of Friscoll, who'd been scouting out the swarm.

She relayed his story of the world of *Unital Ring* being three concentric rings and the route to the next step up going through the hornets' nest, and she told of how they'd worked with Dikkos and the other *Alfheim Online* players, Zarion and the *Insectsite* players, and the Bashin and the Patter to tackle the fight and emerge victorious…

Once Lisbeth reached the end of her story, Asuna took a deep breath before responding.

"…So you're saying that the swarm of giant bees and their queen play a similar role to the bosses on the twenty-fifth and fiftieth floors in *SAO*?"

"Ummm…yeah, I guess?" Lisbeth said initially but then changed her mind. "Actually, considering that you helped beat the seventy-fifth-floor boss in Aincrad, I don't know that I would put this boss fight on the same level."

"Oh, don't say that. *Unital Ring* is the same as *SAO* in that you can't afford to die. Besides, your raid party only had twenty-four

people, you said? From what I'm hearing, it was probably a fight meant for a group of fifty or more to finish…"

"Hmm. Well, the boss room…not that it was a room, more like a giant tree dome…I'd say that we could have easily fit a hundred players in a space that size. It was actually a really close fight, but the MVPs were definitely Sinon and Silica. Sinon's leadership and accuracy were impressive, and Silica…She reminded me of Kirito."

"Huh…? In how she fought?" Asuna asked, confused. In her mind, Silica's in-and-out agility-focused fighting style and Kirito's furious attack-first close-combat style, aided by preternatural recognition, didn't share much in common.

But to her surprise, Lisbeth shook her head and said, "Not in terms of power, but imagination. When the queen came out to fight, all these surprises kept coming up, but Silica was so quick on her feet to react to them, you'd be impressed. Especially when she delivered the finishing blow! Five of us surrounded the queen when she fell to the ground, and we held our arms up like this and called forth our inherited weapons, which were too heavy to lift, and…"

She rose from her seat excitedly, holding her hands up in a demonstration.

"We dropped them right on the queen! Sounds like something Kirito would come up with, right?! Talk about a wild idea that takes advantage of how the system works! The way you muscle up when your back's against the wall!"

"Ha-ha…Yes, I see," Asuna said with a giggle.

Lisbeth blinked, coming back to her senses, then cleared her throat and sat down again. "Well…anyway, I'm just saying that it's nice to see your underclassmen come into their own."

Asuna laughed again. "This isn't a school athletic team."

On that topic, however, Asuna had heard that Lisbeth was planning to continue to higher education. Did that mean that once she graduated from the returnee school and went to college, she'd graduate from playing VRMMOs, too?

She opened her mouth to ask, then thought better of it. She wanted to treasure this time with everyone while it was here…at least until the *UR* incident was resolved and everyone went back to *ALO*.

Instead, she got back on track. "So you beat the hornet boss. How does that connect to the crowds in Ruis na Ríg?"

"Well, there's a cliff wall north of the forest…Friscoll called it the first barrier. I mentioned how the hornet boss was like the guard of that barrier. Well, news spread to the Stiss Ruins right away that we beat it. Apparently, we were the third-fastest group in *Unital Ring* to beat the guardian boss."

"The third…Which games were the first and second?"

"I don't know the order, but apparently it's *Asuka Empire* and a game called *Apocalyptic Date*."

Asuna wasn't that familiar with everything about The Seed Nexus, but she had heard of both of those games. *Asuka* was a Japanese-themed VRMMO that Yuuki and her Sleeping Knights played before they converted to *ALO*. *AD* was a post-apocalyptic game that was surprisingly popular given the niche choice of having all the player avatars be anthro.

"Interesting…So basically, all the *ALO* players who heard you guys beat the guard boss decided we had a chance to catch up to *AE* and *AD*, and they moved their base of operations to Ruis na Ríg?" Asuna guessed.

Lisbeth affirmed her guess somewhat bashfully. "Yeah, you might say that. Of course, it's only a small portion of the *ALO* players, but we've still got a good five or six hundred…"

"You should be proud! Your hard work got this many people excited about their future possibilities," Asuna said, leaning forward to pat Lisbeth's arm. Her friend rubbed the side of her nose and chuckled with embarrassment. It was such a theatrical gesture that Asuna couldn't help but burst into laughter herself. She gazed out at the stone wall surrounding the log cabin's parcel of land.

"…Well, I understand why there are so many people here, but why is the gate gone?"

"Oh, that's easy. You know how the gates and doors that you can make on your own in *Unital Ring* don't have any system-level locks on them?"

She had a point there. The missing gate had only been fastened by a primitive bolt from the inside. It had been very hard to keep it safely closed when Schulz's team attacked, presumably

lured into doing it by Mutasina's gang, Asuna recalled vaguely as she listened to Lisbeth's explanation.

"We beat the boss around four, and I went back to Ruis na Ríg at five. Not long after that, by six, the first travelers from the Stiss Ruins started showing up here. The thing is, everyone explores a new town when they get there, right? Naturally, they want to know what the round walled structure in the middle of town contains. We had the bolt in place, but they were pounding on the gate and trying to climb the pillars, see…So after conferring with Agil and the gang, we did an emergency removal of the gate, filled in the gap in the stone wall, and made it so you can go in and out through a tunnel."

"So that's what happened…"

At first, she'd thought it might even be a bug, but this made much more sense. If Asuna were one of the people visiting, she would have been curious enough to try knocking on the gate, too, she supposed.

"But…if that's the case, removing the gate doesn't actually solve the issue. Anyone nimble enough can climb up the wall, and you could destroy the wall itself with a strong enough hammer…"

"Yeah, that's the problem." Lisbeth groaned, side-eyeing the wall as she finished her fruit tea. Asuna drained her cup as well and exhaled.

Twenty minutes had already passed since she dived in, and there was a curtain of stars twinkling in the blue night sky. If the roads to Kawagoe were clear, Kikuoka would have dropped off Kirito at home by now, but even he would need another ten minutes to dive in.

"…From what I hear, though, Dikkos and Holgar and the like have been telling folks that the home in the center of town belongs to Kirito and to avoid messing with it," Lisbeth reassured Asuna as she poured more tea.

"Oh, that's good," Asuna murmured, but a sobering thought occurred to her. "Wait…wouldn't that just increase the chances of people wanting to mess with the cabin…?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha. Yeah, that's the problem." Lisbeth grimaced.

Kirito was the Black Swordsman who beat *SAO*, fought famed duels with Yuuki in the duel tournament of *ALO*, and made himself

a legend with his lightsword in *GGO*'s Bullet of Bullets—at this point, just about any VRMMO player had at least heard of him. Unfortunately, however, not all of them thought well of him. And if they found out that Kirito's home was here in *Unital Ring*, where just about anything was possible, there was a high likelihood that someone would try to mess with it.

"Maybe we should at least augment the wall," Asuna murmured.

Lisbeth's smile vanished. "Yeah, this wall is just stones from the Maruba River, packed together with clay. In fact, I don't think I checked its current durability."

She stood up, cup still in hand, so Asuna followed.

In front of the wall, Lisbeth tapped a stone with her free hand. The properties window that appeared said *Crude Stone Wall, Structure, Durability: 527.3*. The durability of a single stone was somewhere between five and ten, so this seemed appropriate for a single wall section, but there was an additional line of text at the bottom. Lisbeth noticed it as well and read it out loud.

"Hmm? What's this…? *Protection of the Ancient Oak: Added Durability: 100,000…*W-wait, a hundred thousand?!"

The two girls shared stunned looks, then stared at the window again, but they had read it correctly the first time. The log cabin itself had a durability of 12,500, so this new number was literally an order of magnitude higher.

"Protection of the Ancient Oak…but there are no ancient trees in here," Asuna murmured, looking around the clearing. They had planted a garden tree next to the cabin, but it certainly wasn't *ancient*. And there hadn't been a protection of this kind on the wall when they'd built it.

Protection. Where had she seen that term before…?

"…Oh!" Asuna cried and rushed toward the other end of the clearing.

"Hey! Where are you going, Asuna?!" Lisbeth shouted after her, but Asuna didn't slow down. She raced across the lawn and only screeched to a halt when she was right at the cabin. She tapped the log wall forcefully to bring up the house's control window.

There were four buttons reading INFORMATION, TRADE, REPAIR, and DISMANTLE. She selected the INFORMATION button, calling up a sub-

window with a special properties section at the bottom.

Level 1 / Protection of the Forest: Within a radius of 100 feet of the center of the building, the owner and any friends or party members have a small chance of executing attack skills whose requirements are not yet met.

She remembered this effect. But at some point, additional special effects had been added.

Level 2 / Protection of the Bear: Within a radius of 150 feet of the center of the building, any animals tamed by the owner or owner's friends will not lose affinity points and will gain an extra 20 defense.

And then one more.

Level 3 / Protection of the Ancient Oak: Within a radius of 150 feet of the center of the building, all secondary structures will gain an addition 1,000 to 100,000 durability, depending on the type. This additional durability will not degrade over time.

"That's it!" they cried together.

The source of the hundred-thousand durability was revealed, but it also gave way to new questions. Since the first day, when they repaired the log cabin, Asuna had not performed any expansion or augmentation of the cabin, so how had its structure level gone up twice? Surely it hadn't simply increased over time.

Uncertainly, Lisbeth suggested, "Maybe…it wasn't that the house itself expanded, but that everything else being built around it increased the level…"

It seemed likely at first glance, but Asuna realized this didn't quite make sense, either.

"Ruis na Ríg has a bunch of different housing structures, and they all have their own structure level, right? If that theory's correct, wouldn't all the houses continually proc the effect on one another and make their levels rise infinitely?"

"Good point…Oh, wait!" Lisbeth exclaimed, and tapped the SPECIAL EFFECTS label on the window.

With a little bell chime, a Tips window appeared. Asuna had forgotten about these. She read the text with Lisbeth.

When a residential structure is built without any other residential structures within a radius of 1,500 feet, it becomes a primary structure and gains special effects in accordance with its

structure level. Anything built in close proximity to the primary structure is categorized as a secondary structure and receives the primary structure's special effects.

"Ummm…?"

Lisbeth seemed uncertain of what she was reading, so Asuna explained the parts she understood.

"It means that only a building that's just plopped down on its own in the middle of nowhere can be a primary structure—basically, the main building—and all the other houses and walls and things that come after it are treated as expansions to the main building. And that Protection of the Ancient Oak only applies to the secondary structures…"

"Hrrm," Lisbeth grunted, and tapped the STRUCTURE LEVEL label this time. The sub-window popped up a sub-sub-window with a little ring.

All primary structures have a structure level. Structure level rises as the primary structure is strengthened and expanded or as secondary structures are built. When structure level rises, protective effects are added. Secondary structures always have a structure level of zero, however, and do not earn protective effects of their own.

"Ahhh, I see now," Lisbeth said, catching on quick this time. She snapped her fingers. "So the reason the log cabin's level rose is because we built a ton of houses around it. But because all the other ones are secondary structures, they don't give one another experience."

"When building all those houses for Ruis na Ríg, someone probably would have noticed the effects of the protection if they'd checked closely on the log cabin. In any case, that Protection of the Ancient Oak will be a massive help. As long as the cabin doesn't get destroyed, this means that all the homes and walls in Ruis na Ríg are practically indestructible."

"Yes, I suppose so. Oh, but…"

Lisbeth closed the two smaller windows and reexamined the explanation of the Protection of the Ancient Oak on the original pop-up.

"It says the radius of effect is a hundred and fifty feet, so I guess that would be the limit of how far we can build Ruis na

Ríg…”

“But fifty yards should be enough, right? I’m pretty sure we’re only at thirty right now.”

“Wellll,” Lisbeth said meaningfully, and glanced down to her right. Asuna followed her lead and checked the clock. It was seven thirty—about time for Kirito to show up.

Exactly as the thought entered her mind, the door on the porch to their left opened.

She and Lisbeth looked up. Sure enough, it was Kirito leaping out of the cabin. The girls were standing next to the wall, so he didn’t notice them at all, hurling himself off the porch and sprinting to the southwest. When he reached the spot where the gate had been the previous day, he came to a sliding stop in a cloud of dust.

“Wh-what the—?! There’s no gate!”

Asuna looked Lisbeth right in the eyes, and they both burst into laughter.

Two minutes later, Asuna, Lisbeth, and Kirito were walking through the tunnel from the newly built tower to the west.

Based on what she had said earlier, Lisbeth’s group beat the guardian boss at around four in the afternoon, and people started arriving at Ruis na Ríg from the Stiss Ruins at around six. Considering that it was a nearly twenty-mile route between the two, that was a remarkable pace, but it also meant that the gang scrapped the gate, built the tower, and dug out the tunnel in just one hour after that point.

Of course, it was a game world, so removal, like construction, was an instantaneous process in the menu, but the tunnel couldn’t have been easy. In fact, Asuna had not been aware that you could dig a hole big enough for a person to fit through in *Unital Ring*. In *SAO* and *ALO*, the ground was impervious to any kind of destruction. She’d just assumed that held true here, too.

They traveled through the dirt tunnel for about sixty feet, at which point there was a staircase ahead. Lisbeth went first, holding the torch, and at the top, they emerged into a small tent. This was newly built as well; the ground was bare, and there was no furniture nor people inside.

Kirito was the last up the stairs. He lifted the tent fabric hanging over the exit just a bit to look outside.

"Ahhh, so it comes out into the Bashin housing area. Yes, I don't suppose any shoppers are going to come wandering in here."

"You'd think." Lisbeth scowled. "But some of the new players around here just walked into the Bashin and Patter homes as though they owned the place, so we had to surround their living areas with tall fences. That settled things down for the moment, but Agil said that it might develop into a big problem in the future."

"Huh…? What do you mean?"

"Well, look outside the town," Lisbeth said, lifting the flap so she could step out of the tent.

The Bashin living quarters were shaped like a quarter slice taken from a ring cake. Tents of different sizes stood on the east end of the area, while three long and narrow wooden buildings were on the west end.

Yesterday, there was nothing separating the dwellings from the paths, but now there was a six-foot-tall fence surrounding the living quarters. It wasn't entirely shut off, however; there were gates to the north and south, and there was no fence along the interior path. Instead, a row of smaller mercantile tents was set up facing the road, and they were packed with customers.

The Bashin were good at fashioning pelts, bones, and fangs into tools and objects—their leather armor and bone weapons were lightweight, sturdy, and good-looking. They also weren't cheap, but there were bound to be more than a few players who preferred the Bashin's wares over Lisbeth's orthodox iron gear.

Lisbeth was thinking the same thing at that moment. "I can't fall behind," she murmured, and headed for the north gate.

They walked on the northwest path—Ten O'Clock Road—greeting familiar Bashin warriors as they went. On the other side of the path was the stables area, so there were only a handful of customers there.

The three stables housed Silica's pet thornspike cave bear, Misha; Kirito's lapispine dark panther, Kuro, and leaden long-tailed eagle, Namari; and Asuna's long-billed giant agamid, Aga. It had

been nearly twenty hours since Asuna had last fed Aga from her own hand, but the NPCs who managed the stable were taking good care of the animals, and with the Protection of the Bear, the pets' affinity would not drop over time, so Asuna swallowed her desire to see Aga and hurried after Lisbeth instead.

They walked down Ten O'Clock Road to Outer Perimeter Road, where Ruis na Ríg's northwest gate came into view. It was wide open, with no guards blocking the way, and beyond it was the vast expanse of the Great Zelletelio Forest. Or at least, it should have been.

"Huh?!"

"Wh-what's this?!"

Asuna and Kirito were shocked.

The forest had been cleared an extra twenty yards or so from the outer wall, where a plethora of homes now huddled up against one another. Most were crude wooden huts, but some were more like stone shacks. They'd been built in a disordered array, as tightly as the system would allow; they faced in all different directions, and the paths between them were twisted and winding. In the tiny gaps where no one could fit the tiniest little shack, players huddled over small campfires, two or three people at a time.

After collecting her thoughts on the stunning sight, Asuna admitted, "It's q-quite remarkable…But why did this happen…?"

"Probably due to the Protection of the Ancient Oak," Lisbeth replied, tapping the wall of a nearby hut. Since she wasn't the owner, the window that popped up listed only the building's type and durability, but sure enough, it said, *Protection of the Ancient Oak: Added Durability: 100,000*.

"Someone must have built a shack right outside the wall first and noticed the protection effect. Normally, the durability would be four or five thousand, which could easily get destroyed and ransacked while you're offline, but with an added hundred thousand, they're basically indestructible. Since your carrying capacity is so limited in this game, having a safe place to store materials at a minimum of effort is a huge advantage. And if you have your own home, you don't need to stay at an inn every time you want to log out," Lisbeth explained.

It all made perfect sense. Asuna and Kirito had gone to extreme lengths to protect their log cabin from the thornspike cave bear the first night they dropped into *Unital Ring*, after all.

"…Ahhh, yes. No wonder they built these," Kirito murmured, nodding deeply. "But how does this relate to the issue of the Bashin living space becoming a problem in the future?"

"Ummm, well, I can only tell you what Agil said to me," Lisbeth admitted, rapping the wall around Ruis na Ríg with the back of her finger this time. "Once you've got a home, you start to want a better one, in a safer location, with more space, right? But the land inside Ruis na Ríg is half occupied by NPC housing. There are going to be people who insist on us kicking them out to let more players in…according to Agil."

"No, we can't do that!" Asuna cried, immediately indignant. "We brought the Bashin and Patter to Ruis na Ríg. When the Skull—I mean, when the Life Harvester attacked, they risked their lives to fight it with us! We can't kick them out—"

"I know, Asuna. We're never going to do that," Kirito declared, brushing her elbow reassuringly.

That helped calm her down a bit. She gave Kirito a look before resuming. "The Protection of the Ancient Oak works over a radius of fifty yards, so we can push the defensive walls out another twenty. We could have everyone temporarily scrap their homes, move the walls out as far as the effect will allow, and then split up the land into parcels so they can rebuild… In fact, if we put together some two- or three-story houses here, we could fit many times the population inside."

"…That is true. But it might be difficult in practical terms," Kirito murmured pensively.

"Why?" she asked.

He glanced at the men happily chatting as they roasted meat on a spit over a fire in the cramped alley. "MMO players tend to dislike allotment systems. The majority don't want a nice little place someone arranged for them; they want to pick out their spot and build their own place however they like. In fact, I bet there are folks who want to build themselves a new town, different from Ruis na Ríg…"

Kirito stopped there, paused, then turned to Asuna and Lisbeth

and spread his arms.

"That's the thing. Why don't they do that? Based on what you said, any home built five hundred yards from Ruis na Ríg will be a —a…"

"Primary structure," Asuna said helpfully.

He pointed at her. "*That.* So if they do that, they can enjoy the protective effects and use all the land they want."

"…Yes, that's true…," Asuna said, mimicking Kirito's look of frustrated confusion.

To their surprise, however, Lisbeth said, "As a matter of fact, people have already tried that."

"Huh?! You mean there's another town nearby?"

"Actually…I'm only passing on this info thirdhand, so I can't vouch for any of it, but what I heard was that one of the groups that came here from the Stiss Ruins went and cleared some land along the river to the northwest and built a home. And in no less than five minutes, a freakin' giant boar came charging along and smashed the house to pieces."

"A boar…"

Asuna and Kirito shared another look.

"…I haven't seen any monster like that around here."

"Neither have I. It couldn't have been drawn to the house…I assume…"

It was a spur-of-the-moment comment, but there was something that caught in Asuna's mind, and she went back into her memory to figure out what it was.

On Sunday, six days ago, the log cabin fell to earth here just minutes after five o'clock in the evening. The gigantic thornspike cave bear attacked roughly three hours later.

What if that attack hadn't been a coincidence…?

"…Maybe it's true, then," Asuna murmured.

Surprised, Lisbeth said, "Meaning the boar actually was drawn to the house? That just doesn't seem fair, does it?"

"No…she might be right. Before you met up with us, Liz, our cabin was attacked by a great huge bear on that very first night."

"Oh yeah. I think you did mention that."

"I assumed that it was drawn by the sound of me using sword skills to fashion the logs into boards, but maybe there's a system

that summons, like, legendary local beasts to attack any new dwelling. The boss near here was a thornspike cave bear, but since Silica tamed one, maybe the game summoned a giant boar to be the new boss…"

Lisbeth grimaced. "Eugh, that's kinda messed up, huh?"

Asuna agreed, but it also made a kind of sense to her. "Yes, it's mean, but the effect of the protection is really powerful. I'm sure it's really hard to build a house, or a town, in the wilderness, but once you get it established, it's much harder for it to be destroyed. I think that's the intended game balance."

"Interesting," murmured Lisbeth. She turned around to look back at Ruis na Ríg.

A diameter of sixty yards was nothing for a town or village in the real world. There were plenty of apartment buildings that were larger than that. But it was *their* town, something they'd fought hard to protect and build up. The thornspike cave bear on the first day, Schulz's party on the second, the Life Harvester on the fourth day, and Mutasina's army on the fifth…One wrong move in any of those battles would've meant defeat, and there could be even larger attacks in the future.

In that light, they couldn't rest on their laurels. While the Protection of the Ancient Oak was mighty, if someone could destroy the log cabin itself somehow, that protection would be lost. This was a world that supported not just primitive guns with gunpowder, but also flying pets and massive magic spells that could suffocate a hundred people at once. If someone managed to bomb the cabin from above, even the sturdiest walls wouldn't help it.

"Hey, Liz."

"Hmm?"

"In the Tips section on the log cabin, it said that structure level rises as the primary structure is strengthened and expanded or as secondary structures are built…right?"

"I can't believe you memorized that line just from reading it once." Lisbeth smirked. "Well, I don't know if it was exactly the same or not, but I recall it saying something like that."

"In that case, we should be able to raise the level more by building up the log cabin itself."

"Uh…are you sure, Asuna?" Kirito asked from over her shoulder.

She turned around. "Yes. We need to do everything in our power."

"…Okay, then." He grinned.

She'd be lying if she said she was totally gung ho about it. That log cabin was the one she spent two very precious weeks in with Kirito, back on the twenty-second floor of Aincrad. That was why they were so desperate to protect it when it literally fell into the world of *Unital Ring*, and she wanted to bring it back to *ALO* in its original form. But it would all be for naught if the cabin was destroyed, and besides, the true heart of the house wasn't in its exact shape.

The faint smile on Kirito's face changed ever so slightly.

"…What is it?"

"Just thinking…when you weren't around, Yui and I talked about expanding the log cabin. I thought you wouldn't like it…but then Yui said that you didn't get hung up on the exterior looks. That as long as the true nature of the house remained, you wouldn't care if the shape of the house changed."

"Yui said that…?"

"So I asked her what the true nature was…," Kirito said, but Asuna held up a hand to stop him.

"It's okay. I know."

"…You do."

They exchanged smiles.

"Ah-*hem*!" somebody said behind them very obviously.

Asuna spun around in a hurry. "S-sorry, Liz."

"Who, me? No need to apologize to little old me! I was just thinking, it would be reeeeal nice to get back to work…"

"Um, w-work?"

"You know? This thing?" Lisbeth said, making a hammer-swinging gesture.

"Oh…right, you were coming back to the log cabin to do some smithing."

"Yep."

"Where did everyone else go, then?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Lisbeth lifted her arm and pointed to the sky to the north.

"They're conquering the stairway dungeon to get up to the second tier!"

4

The memories of Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty started in a space filled with pure-white light. She was dressed in a sheer cloth, lying on her side.

She lifted her eyelids, blinked against the brightness, and slowly rose to a sitting position. Alice looked around, wondering blearily where she was and what she was doing there. That was when she realized that she did not even know who she was. Her name and background were a mystery to her, and she could do nothing but sit there in a daze, until a voice, sweeter than any sugared treat and smoother than silk, spoke from behind her…

"…Sister? What's the matter, Alice?"

A hand rocked her shoulder softly, causing Alice's eyes to bolt open.

In front of her was a girl with straw-colored hair, gazing at her in concern. Actually, she was too old to be a "girl," but even still, it was clearly visible in the water that her body was as skinny as it had ever been.

"I suppose I must have dozed off for a bit. I'm fine, Selka," Alice replied, eliciting a smile from her sister.

"Yes, it feels wonderful, doesn't it? It was always a dream of mine to take a bath in the cathedral with you."

"Ha-ha…The bath in the cottage in the woods where I lived was too small for us to have gone in at the same time."

"I thought the bath at the church in Rulid was big, but compared to this one, it's like a mouse to a cow," Selka said, employing a common Underworld analogy. The familiarity of it caused Alice to giggle.

"…? What was funny about that?"

"I'm sorry. In the real world, they would say it's like comparing

a snapper to the moon."

"What's a…snapper?"

"I've never seen one myself, but I understand it's a type of turtle."

"A turtle?! Why would they compare Lunaria—I mean, Admina—to a turtle? One is a planet, and the other is just an animal," Selka grumbled, splashing the water. Sadly, Alice could not give her an answer, either. If this were the real world, she would be able to summon a visible holo-window to perform an online search…but, of course, that was not possible here.

Instead, she shrugged. "Their world is chock-full of strange sayings."

"Ohhh…that reminds me. I did notice Kirito and Asuna using some odd words every now and then," Selka murmured, gazing out the window ahead. Alice followed her line of sight.

Beyond the enormous window around Central Cathedral's Great Bath, a curtain of stars twinkled in silence. The golden half circle floating among them had always been Lunaria to Alice, but in recent years, its official name had been changed to the companion star Admina.

It was probably Kirito who had named this star Cardina, and its twin across space Admina. It was clear that they were named after the wise sage Cardinal and the pontifex Administrator. One day, she wanted to ask him why he named a planet after the very woman he defeated in such a terrible battle, but sadly, Kirito no longer had any memory of being the Star King.

"…Have you ever been to Admina, Selka?" she asked on a sudden whim.

Her sister splashed the water again. "Of course! In fact, I was present for the very first expedition there. The moment I got out of the dragoncraft and stepped into a field of yellow flowers stretching all the way to the horizon was something I'll never forget."

"…Ah, of course. You were the commander of the sacred artificers brigade."

That was a title that had not existed in the Axiom Church two centuries ago. The sacred articians in the Church were called monks, and they toiled under the four high priests, with Prime Senator Chudelkin above them all. That would mean the commander of the sacred artificers brigade was a spiritual successor to Chudelkin's position, though it had belonged to Ayuha Furia before Selka.

That ignoble history wasn't pleasant to think about, but the nature of their predecessor's character did not tarnish Ayuha's and Selka's accomplishments one bit.

"You've done well, Selka," Alice said, reaching out to brush her sister's damp hair. Selka was physically and mentally older than her now, but a little sister was always a little sister. She beamed happily and leaned against Alice.

When Kirito and Asuna had vanished into beams of light on the eightieth floor, Alice assumed she would be removed moments later and hugged Selka tight. But the seconds ticked by with no change, and eventually, feeling somewhat bashful, she let go of her sister. Most likely, Dr. Koujiro had been considerate and allowed Alice to continue her dive.

She was grateful for that, but she also had no means of communicating with the real world, so she didn't know when she might be disconnected. She had been uncertain of how to spend this bonus time, until Selka proclaimed, "I want to soak in the bath!"

After all, Selka had been seated in the Cloudtop Garden for 140 years. Airy kept dusting her petrified body every day of that time, but it was understandable that she might want to clean off.

Ronie and Tiese agreed at once, so the group went from the eightieth floor to the ninetieth, where Airy and Eolyne left them to perform other duties, so the six girls (and one animal) enjoyed

the bath. Alice, Stica, and Laurannei had just bathed four hours earlier, but the allure of the cathedral's Great Bath was so great that even going multiple times in one day didn't dull the novelty.

Not far away, the other four were sitting in a circle, engaged in conversation. It seemed that the two descendants were explaining the family history to their ancestors. If they intended to give a detailed account of two centuries of history, however, they would be in here for hours and hours.

Alice had a whole host of topics that she intended to talk about if she was ever reunited with Selka, but now that they were here, soaking in the bath, the hot water alone filled her body and mind, saturating her and making her feel like her entire being was floating. That was why she had started to drift off earlier. What a waste, to nod off while she was experiencing something she'd waited so long for…

"…Are you tired, Alice? If you want to sleep, you should get some sleep," Selka whispered.

Alice struggled to lift the eyelids that had drooped without her realizing it. "No, I'm fine. I finally have the chance to see you again—we need to keep talking."

"Ha-ha…You're like a little child." Selka giggled. While Alice took that personally, according to Airy, Selka was mentally over seventy years old now, while Alice herself only had six years and a few months' worth of memories.

No longer did she believe that Alice Synthesis Thirty was merely a temporary soul existing in the body of Alice Zuberg. But even still, there were times when she felt unbearably juvenile and foolish.

She reached out once again, tracing her fingers across Selka's cheek, which seemed so much more adult than the girl in her memory.

"Selka…did you undergo the life-freezing art because of me…?" she asked, a question she had not intended to voice aloud. Immediately, she regretted her mistake, but it was too late now.

Selka took Alice's hand and enveloped it in both of hers. "Of course I did. But that wasn't the only reason."

"…Meaning?"

"Well…the life-freezing art stops the decrease of life and

change in appearance over time, but it can't prevent the fluctlight's lowered capacity and fragmentation. In order to wait for the day when you returned to the Underworld, we needed to bring back the lost petrification art, the formula for the Deep Freeze art…But…"

She paused, contemplating her answer and looking to the sky to the north.

"…Sister Azalia back in Rulid taught me that it's the way of the world for people to be born, grow, age, and die—that it is the will of Stacia. Because of that, I always felt some resistance to the idea of the life-freezing and petrification arts. I wasn't sure if it was right to bring back sacred arts that defy the teachings of the Church, just for my own selfish desire to see you one more time. But then one day I spoke to Kirito about it…"

"He said it was okay for you to be selfish, didn't he?" Alice interjected.

Selka looked momentarily stunned. Then she burst into laughter. "That's right! But when he said it, it was more like, 'You can be much, much, muuuch more selfish, Selka! I forgive you!'"

"…I can hear him saying it now."

"Hee-hee. And right after that, even though I was at the cathedral as an apprentice nun, he told me something that totally shook my faith—that the most selfish person in all the world was Administrator, who created the Axiom Church and the Taboo Index. After I heard that, it felt like my own troubles were just so petty in comparison, and I decided I should prioritize what was truly most important to me."

"What was that…?"

"To see you again, of course."

Selka pulled Alice's hand to her chest, then let go.

"…After that, I began researching the petrification art with Lady Ayuha…At the time, I wasn't intending to undergo the life-freezing art, but you'd be shocked if you met me and I was a shriveled-up old crone, wouldn't you? Right around that time, Ronie and Tiese underwent the life-freezing art for their own reasons, so I decided to do it with them."

"They did…?" Alice murmured, glancing over at the distant group of four. "What was their reason?"

"Hmm…It might be better for you to ask them yourself…"

That put an end to Alice's line of questioning. As a matter of fact, she had thought Airy's explanation in the Cloudtop Garden rather strange. She had only interacted with Ronie and Tiese for a few days in the midst of the Otherworld War, but she found them to be very good, sweet girls. Although it was entirely her own imagination, she thought they would find suitable life partners, get married, start their own families, and live to be old and happy.

So while their promotion to Integrity Knights was one thing, Alice was surprised to hear they had undergone the life-freezing art. Not aging, as Selka had just mentioned, meant cutting yourself off from the proper way of the world. Those knights who had lived well over a hundred years—like Deusolbert, Fanatio, and Bercouli—did not seem happy to have eternal life, Alice thought. Neither did the Integrity Knights nor even Administrator, who performed the art on herself.

Selka seemed to detect something in Alice's expression. She leaned over and whispered into her ear: "I know I shouldn't say this, but it's not an unhappy reason. I'm sure they would be happy to tell you."

"Oh…then I suppose I'll ask when I get the chance," Alice said, grinning back.

She was about to suggest that they get out of the bath when a calm but crisp voice from the doorway to the changing room intoned, "The food is ready, everyone."

Suddenly, as though it understood the meaning of the words, Natsu, the long-eared wetrat, burst out of the water and squealed, "*Kyurururu!*"

The party rose from the bath, dried off, and dressed, after which they followed Airy to the Morning Star Lookout on the ninety-fifth floor.

The outer edge of the floor, which had been open to the sky two hundred years ago, was now hidden by long marble planters filled with trees. Resting in the center of the very spacious floor was a large pure-white dragoncraft. At first, it seemed just the way it had looked when she visited this floor earlier in the day, but upon closer inspection of the X'rphan Mk. 13, she saw that its

belly armor was deeply torn, shattering the tubes and mechanisms inside. Alice did not know the first thing about a dragoncraft's inner workings, but she could intuitively tell that this damage would not be easy to repair.

She had stopped to stare at the damaged dragoncraft at the top of the stairs; Ronie and Tiese walked past her and stopped a few steps later.

Airy had told them that the X'rphan had been *rolled out*—a term Alice took to mean *completed*—exactly a hundred years ago, in 482 SE. Selka, Ronie, and Tiese were turned to stone in 441, so this had to be the first time they were ever seeing this craft.

Alice's supposition was proven correct. Tiese marveled, "So *this* is the final dragoncraft that Kirito built…"

Ronie pointed toward the rear of the craft. "Look, there are three exhaust ports. He *did* succeed at developing the two-seat triple engine."

Even Selka had a comment. "I'm amazed it flew from Admina to Cardina in that state…"

"No, it did not fly," corrected Airy, with Natsu on her shoulder.

"Huh…?" This confused Ronie. "But that damage came from an attack on Admina, didn't it?"

"Correct. Lord Kirito opened a 'door' from Admina to this location and teleported the X'rphan through it."

"……"

Alice had difficulty concealing her laughter from the stunned trio.

She may have felt like the decades of life the girls had as knights after her departure from this world left her trying to catch up from behind, but there was something universal about Kirito's ability to shock and stun people in any era.

"Please have a seat," Airy said, motioning them toward the table. Then she turned to the dragoncraft and raised her voice. "Lord Eolyne, it is time to eat."

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the giant gash in the belly of the dragoncraft and nimbly hopped to the ground. It was Integrity Pilot Commander Eolyne Herlentz.

His white mask was still on, but he had changed out of his uniform into a two-piece connected work outfit. Based on the way

it was dirtied, he had probably been examining the extent of the damage or attempting to repair some of it.

Stica and Laurannei were the last to reach the top of the stairs, and as soon as they saw the commander, they flew into consternated activity.

"My lord, allow us to handle the repair!"

"We'll call for a team of engineers to come at once!"

"No, that's not an option," Eolyne said, wiping the back of his neck with a hand towel as he approached. He was calm but sounded a bit lifeless. "We can't bring a repair team into the sealed floors of the cathedral, and there's no way to transport the X'rphan to the base. Of course, Kirito might be able to do that with Incarnation, but the craft is packed full of mechanisms and devices that I've never seen before. It might be more than even the engineers can handle, and it's probably best that we don't let it leave this place, for secrecy reasons…"

Alice thought about mentioning that if Kirito made the dragoncraft, he might be able to repair it, too, but thought better of it. He didn't have any memory of having developed it at this point in time.

Kirito's decision to take on the role of Star King, when he was so devoid of the desire for political power and control, must have been because he had no other escape from the responsibility. It was a fact that he had spent more than a century working for the benefit of the Underworld. She hoped that someday he would regain those memories, if for no other reason than so that he could hear their gratitude for his effort and service—but it was hard to give voice to that wish, knowing that such a change might turn Kirito into someone other than the person she knew today.

They said it was Kirito and Asuna who had requested their memories of being Star King and Queen be deleted. Issues of memory capacity aside, surely there could have been a means of making space while still preserving the truly important memories. Why had they chosen to eliminate that vast stretch of valuable, precious experience, starting from right after the Otherworld War?

She was shaken out of this train of thought by Selka, who had walked over and grabbed her hand.

"Come, Alice, it's time to eat!"

"Uh…right."

Selka led her to a long white table made of marble, which was lit by candelabras. Five platinum oak seats were lined up on either side, for ten settings in total. All the chairs had been here since the era of the Axiom Church, two centuries ago.

When Alice had lived in this tower as an Integrity Knight, Administrator left her chamber on the top floor only on very rare occasions, one of which was to invite Alice up to this very table on the Morning Star Lookout for tea, a few times a year. Alice's involvement had merely been to report on her own accomplishments and the activity of the Dark Territory, however, and she did not recall ever having a true conversation there. On the other hand, Administrator's personal chef, Hana, made her exclusive baked sweets that were not served at the cafeteria on the ninety-fourth floor, so Alice had secretly looked forward to those occasions a little.

Now the table—which looked the exact same as it did centuries ago—was laden with fresh salads, bowls of steaming stew, baked sweets with a familiar scent, and a cake iced with fresh sweet cream, which had not existed back then.

Tiese, Ronie, Stica, and Laurannei had already taken their seats and were waiting for the others. The two youngest looked vaguely blank-eyed, as though their hunger was giving them an out-of-body experience with the feast so close at hand.

It wouldn't be good to keep them waiting, so Alice promptly sat across from Tiese. Selka sat down next to Alice, but Eolyne started down the hallway to the stairs and said to Airy, "I'll go wash off first, Lady Trume."

"Very well. You may use the Great Bath on the ninetieth floor," Airy replied.

The pilot commander thanked her and quickly headed for the stairs.

Airy turned back to the party and said, "Please enjoy, everyone."

Instantly, Stica's and Laurannei's hands were a blur, grabbing their forks and knives.

Gleefully, they shouted, "Bless this meal!!"

5

If only there were two of me!

In my eighteen years of life, I had probably never made this wish as hard as I did now.

I was curious about what was happening in *Unital Ring*, of course. After I heard about Silica's team beating the hornet boss, the three-tiered world map, the staircase dungeon up to the second tier, and that two other factions were already ahead of the *ALO* players, it wasn't easy to bring myself to log out again.

But even as I was rushing through the Great Zelletelio Forest, I couldn't get the swirling mysteries in the Underworld out of my mind.

The secret base on Admina, the cruel experiments being performed there, the relationship of the enigmatic gunner Istar to Eolyne, and the identity and motive of the intruder from the real world.

On top of that, I still hadn't had a real conversation with Ronie, Tiese, and Selka yet. Selka, in particular, I hadn't spoken with since first leaving the village of Rulid. Ronie and Tiese were present for the peace talks with the Dark Territory, which I barely remembered, but whatever the last words we traded were, I could not recall.

If possible, I wished I could duplicate my fluctlight so that one of me could be in *Unital Ring* and the other could be in the Underworld at the same time—until I realized that it meant being two people at once. And knowing my personality, I would not end up being friends with my other self. I had already cursed (on many occasions) His Majesty Star King Kirito, and that wasn't an imaginary identical twin, but my actual, nonreplicable past self.

I guess I've got no choice but to keep alternating between the two worlds and catching up each time, I lamented to myself.

Then I remembered that, before we went into Central Cathedral, Eolyne had said there might be a way to solve all our problems of limited time here. What did he mean by that? Obviously, he wasn't going to convince our parents to let Asuna and me go on another long-term dive with an IV for fluids.

I was turning all these ideas over in my head as I marched through the forest on autopilot when Lisbeth came to a stop ahead of me and pointed out the entrance to the hornet's nest dome.

I held out my hand to stop Kuro, the lapispine dark panther, and lifted my torch with the other.

About five yards ahead, thick and thorny bushes formed a tangled, elongated structure that acted as a natural barrier. According to Friscoll (who told Lisbeth, who told me), this thorny barrier continued to the east and west for miles and couldn't be walked around.

Lisbeth was pointing at the mouth of a dark tunnel in the middle of the thorn bushes. The way the pointed thorns crowded around the entrance like teeth was very ominous.

"…And the boss won't repop?" asked a worried Asuna, who was accompanied by Aga, the long-billed giant agamid.

Lisbeth made a face and looked upward. "Mmm. Maybe?"

"Maybe? Liz…"

"Ah-ha-ha! You'll be fine. Even if it has repopped, the tunnel exit is a safe area, and you'll know from the wings buzzing right away."

"I'm trusting you on this!" Asuna reminded her, and Aga threw in an admonishing "*Qweh!*"

Of course, there was no such thing as a long-billed giant agamid in the real world, but agamids were a family of tree-climbing lizards found in a wide range of habitats from Asia to Africa. The more famed members of the family included frilled lizards and bearded dragons, and the others were all very lizardish, to coin a word. But for some reason, while Aga had a body like a miniature carnivorous dinosaur, its head looked like it belonged to a platypus, which made me want to ask, *How is this a lizard?!*

Its body was covered in green scales, and many sharp teeth

lined the inside of its beak. There were vicious claws on the ends of its limbs, and it looked the most monstrous of our four pets—five, if you included Pina—but there was something about it that was strangely endearing.

Lisbeth walked up to Aga, gurgling "Agagagaga" for some reason, and scratched it under the chin. Then she went to Kuro and shook the scruff of its neck, going "Kurrrr." Once she was satisfied, she turned on her heel.

"Let's go!"

Asuna and I shared a very bemused look before following Lisbeth down the tunnel.

Fortunately, the gilnaris hornets had not reappeared. It had only been four hours since they were vanquished, so we couldn't be sure they would *never* come back, but if they were like floor bosses in *SAO*, they'd probably never return.

That made me regret not being there to take part in the fight, but I had to give the highest of props to Silica and Sinon for leading the battle and seizing victory without losing a single player or NPC. Subsequently, I also wanted to know what kind of treasure dropped…

We walked through a vast dome under a canopy of tree branches. There was no buzzing of wings here, but large rafflesia-like flowers dotting the ground played host to some ominous skittering sounds. According to Lisbeth, the sounds were coming from large four-inch ticks that fed on the nectar of the flowers, which were called gargamols.

The ticks' bellies were full of nectar, so if caught, they might serve as a valuable source of sugar, but I held off on collecting any, as I gauged that there was at least a 70 percent chance that Asuna would scream her head off.

Once across the fifty-yard dome—which made it nearly the size of Ruis na Ríg—a nearly vertical cliff face came into view. I took it to be the base of the six-hundred-foot wall that separated the first and second tiers of *Unital Ring*'s world map. If I climbed to one of the taller trees in the Great Zelletelio Forest during the day, I would probably be able to see it to the north.

The surface of the cliff had a dull, hard luster to it, and almost

zero outcroppings that you might use as a handhold or foothold. Even in a virtual world, attempting to free-climb this cliff was an act of suicide.

Maybe with a flying pet, like Namari, the leaden long-tailed eagle, you could fly up, I thought for a moment. But of course, it wouldn't be that simple. There would inevitably be a lair of some incredibly powerful flying monster at the top that would destroy you if you flew closer, and I didn't want to test that theory out.

So I stifled my sense of adventure and let Lisbeth guide us toward the rock face. Our three torches illuminated an elliptical cave mouth, hidden behind two trees.

The opening was about seven feet tall and five feet wide. At first glance, the rough rock face was hard to identify as natural or artificial. If I didn't know it already, I never would have guessed that this was the only route to get to the next tier of the map.

"It's surprisingly tiny," Asuna remarked.

"Right?" said Lisbeth. "Sinon was guessing that this was meant to limit the size of the pets you can take with you to the next tier."

"Oh…"

She glanced at the pets with us. Aga was about as tall as Asuna but had a slim profile, so it should be able to squeeze through in terms of width. Kuro could easily fit, of course, but Misha, the thornspike cave bear, was likely to hurt its shoulders trying to scrape through.

"Is that why Silica didn't take Misha? Because it would be terrible if it got stuck?"

"Yep. She wanted to reach the exit with just people first, so she could check if Misha could get through all the way."

"I see…And who's inside the cave right now?"

"Ummm, Silica, Sinon, Klein, Argo, Leafa, Yui, Holgar, Zarion, Ceecee…and Friscoll, I think," Lisbeth listed, counting them off on her fingers. "There were a bunch more in the hornet boss fight, but they all returned to Ruis na Ríg first and re-formed the cave raid party with people who still had time. The Bashin and Patter have a rule that you must not cross the Last Wall."

"The Last Wall…"

The name bore a faint similarity to the End Mountains, which surrounded the human realm of the Underworld, but that was

surely a coincidence.

"Why didn't you take part in the cave raid, Liz?" Asuna asked.

Lisbeth just smiled for some reason.

"You'll find out soon."

It was chilly inside the cave, but still much more comfortable than the slick, dampened cave behind the waterfall we found downstream on the Maruba River.

About sixty feet down the twisting passage, we entered a wide-open chamber. On the other side was an upward staircase that had clearly been carved by human hands. We held out our torches to illuminate every bit of the cave, but there were no monsters.

Instead, I found a reddish-black bit of rock sticking out of the dark-gray wall, and grunted with excitement. The texture was cold and rough to the touch. It was a bit of iron ore.

"Oh! There's still some left in here?" Lisbeth commented, so I spun around to face her.

"I get it. You were able to refill on iron ore in here, so you took it back to Ruis na Ríg to do more smithing with it."

"Bingo."

"Then I guess we interrupted your work. Sorry for making you escort us, Liz," Asuna apologized, but Lisbeth shook her head vehemently.

"No, no, I've got enough stock in the store to last a night, and you can never have enough iron ore!"

She approached the wall with a pickax and smacked the ore outcropping with practiced ease. It took only five swings to break the ore in two and send it crumbling to the ground.

I picked up half and handed it to Lisbeth. Unfortunately, as far as I could see, there were no other ores around.

It was time to feed Kuro and Aga some dried meat, and we refilled on TP and SP before heading up the stairs. About three stories up, by real-world measurements, there was another flat passageway. Like the labyrinth towers in Aincrad, it seemed this dungeon was made of floors connected by stairs. But while the ones in the old game got up to a hundred yards tall, this was two hundred. It was nearly as tall as the Tokyo municipal building.

Some monsters began appearing on the second floor, but very infrequently. Silica's group had an hour and a half head start on us, so they had probably cleaned up everything in our path.

We went as fast as we could while dispatching classic cave monsters like scorpions, bats, and centipedes and snatching every bit of ore we came across. Thankfully, the advance party had done us the huge favor of marking their direction at every fork in the path. It was a very simple method—they placed a chunk of favillite from the Maruba River on the route leading to the next set of stairs—and because it was much lighter in color than the rock of this cave, it made for an easy visual marker.

We cleared the fifth, sixth, and seventh floors with ease, and I was just thinking that we were about halfway through, when I heard the faint ringing of metal, and Kuro growled softly. If Kuro's sharp hearing heard it, then it wasn't just a trick of my ears. If there was conflict happening in this cave, one side was guaranteed to be Silica's group.

"That's combat!" I hissed to Asuna and Lisbeth, and took off running.

When I rushed up the stairs to the next floor, the sounds grew much clearer. At the same time, I had a bad premonition. If they were fighting scorpions or centipedes, there wouldn't be this much continual metallic clashing. If this was the sound of weapon on weapon, or weapon on armor, then their opponent might be human—other players.

I rushed up three stories' worth of stairs, nearly forty feet, and launched myself onto the eighth floor, where I learned that my expectations were only half-correct.

It was a space the size of a basketball court, with a level of artifice and craft that was very different from the natural caves of the previous floors. The floor and ceiling were excavated into flat surfaces, and there was a semicircle of pillars along the walls. Niches between each pair of pillars held vases filled with oil, presumably, because they flickered with eerie pale flames.

Ahead of us in a diamond formation, their backs turned to us, was our friends' advance party.

But they were not fighting other players. It was a giant, ten feet tall and made of stone—a golem.

Our friends hadn't noticed me yet. I had to hold myself back from calling out to them; distracting a party engaged in combat while executing tight combination maneuvers would only throw them into chaos. Asuna, Lisbeth, Kuro, and Aga stopped just behind me, maintaining their silence.

I tried to stifle my impatient concern and focused on getting a grasp of the situation.

On the front line of the formation were Holgar, Zarion, Klein, and Leafa. In the center were the shield-bearing Holgar and the rhinoceros beetle Zarion, blocking the golem while Klein and Leafa assisted them from either side.

The middle line of the formation was Silica, Argo, Friscoll, and a slender Six. That was probably Ceecee. They were attacking from the left and right, hoping to catch the golem's weak spot, but it seemed like they were only drawing lots of sparks and not delivering any real damage.

In the rear were Yui and Sinon. The plan was probably for them to attack at a distance with magic and the musket, but both were only on standby, watching and waiting.

Just as I felt I understood the situation, the golem let out a bizarre bellow.

"Gwooohnnnn!!"

It put its fists together, like two carved boulders, and held them behind its head.

"Here comes the slam!" Klein warned, dropping his hips and squaring up. The four tanks in front might be tough, but my instincts were screaming that they couldn't withstand a blow like that. I wanted to shout at them to dodge; instead, I had to tell myself that they knew what they were doing better than me.

The golem held its charging motion for a tauntingly long time, at least two whole seconds, before slamming its fists down with such speed, the air of the chamber shook.

The four on the front line weren't fooled by the golem's timing and leaped out of the way just at the right moment. The golem's fists smashed into nothing but ground, but that was not the end of it. A shock wave spread outward along the ground, wobbling the legs of the players nearby. It would have been too fast if I were standing right there, but at this distance, I had enough time

to watch the wave approach and jump over it.

While in the air, I raised my sword to my right shoulder. The blade whined with vibration and glowed bright green.

As I landed from jumping over the shock wave, I unleashed the sword skill Sonic Leap. Pushing off my planting foot to maximize the acceleration boost the system gave me, I flew right at the golem's head, twenty-five feet away and ten feet off the ground.

Obviously, the golem's limbs were as hard as metal—but what about the head?

"Rrraah!"

I struck the golem between the eyes with every bit of force I could muster. From what I recalled of the Jewish legends that the golem came from, its forehead was its weak spot.

However, while my strike was accurate, it only produced an ugly, discordant clang and enough sparks to sear my vision with the color white. I was easily knocked back and lost my balance, but not before I got a foot on the golem's shoulder, allowing me to push off and do a backflip into a steady landing.

"Nwah?! K-Kiri?!" Klein clamored from over my left shoulder.

I decided to forgo a greeting, instead telling him, "See if you can pull its aggro for another ten seconds!"

"Y-yeah, you got it!" he called back, thankfully grasping what I planned, and readied his scimitar at waist height.

While my best attack had been deflected, it did succeed at giving the golem a minor stun effect, stopping it cold. Klein used the sword skill Reaver with his special-order extra-long scimitar to strike the golem's shin.

"Gwooohnn!"

It wasn't the golem's weak point or anything like that, but the golem sounded furious nonetheless. The monster thrust its left fist at Klein, but Zarion blocked it with the thick carapace on his forehead.

At that point, I raced around the golem, trying to circle behind it. The group would have tried attacking its back already, of course. In fact, there were fresh marks all over its back, but none were deeper than a mere scratch of the surface.

My eyes were wide, searching intently all over the golem's

massive form. I'd already seen its front, and there was nothing that indicated a weak point. So maybe its back would have something, I hoped—but there were no words, no jewels, no sigils, not even any minor protrusions or divots to take advantage of.

The boss of the fifth floor of Aincrad, Fuscus the Vacant Colossus, had the symbol of its weakness visible on its forehead at the start; that point then moved to other spots around its body as the fight wore on. They didn't look at all alike, but a golem was a golem, and there would surely be a weakness somewhere, I assumed. Apparently, I had assumed wrong.

Once again, the golem placed its hands together and swung them back over its head.

Since I'd managed to land a blow on it, the golem's spindle cursor was now visible to me. It had two HP bars and the name *Statue of Aur-Dah*. I didn't know how the last part was meant to be pronounced.

The golem's HP was practically full, while the front-line members had dropped down to around 70 percent of their health. They succeeded at jumping away from the powerful smash attack, but the shock wave was once again unavoidable. When they faltered, the golem tried to kick them.

"…?!"

When it started the kicking motion, I thought I saw something on the underside of its right foot as the limb was pulled back.

"Gwohnnn!"

The golem thrust its foot out powerfully. The four in front were still faltering and couldn't avoid it. They tried to block with shields and weapons, but they couldn't absorb all the force. They flew backward and smashed into the four members in the middle.

So the formation hadn't broken down, but the front row took even more damage, pushing the center pair of Zarion and Holgar below 50 percent.

"Haaaaah!"

"Uryaaa!"

Two sword skills shone in white and orange. A rapier and a mace struck the golem's midsection, knocking it back several yards. It only knocked a few pixels off the golem's HP bar, but it

did succeed at making it stumble.

"Zarion, Holgar, pull back and heal! Leafa and Klein, take the flanks for Liz and me!" Asuna instructed. The others snapped into action. The golem recovered its balance as the formation was rearranged.

I hadn't just been idly watching the situation play out. In order to turn my earlier discovery into certainty, I'd gotten down on all fours, watching like a hawk.

So it wasn't just my imagination. But how do we…?

I tore my eyes off the golem as it lurched into motion again, and scanned the chamber. Kuro and Aga were on standby at the entrance, but their claws and teeth would be literally pointless against the golem's stone skin. I could see a door on the far side, but it wasn't going to open unless the golem was dead.

The only things on the left and right sides of the room were pillars and walls. Technically, there were also the lit oil vases in the niches along the wall, but if we broke any of them, they'd just send burning oil spilling out across the floor and ruining the fight.

Upon closer look, not all of the vases were lit. Out of the twenty total—ten on each side—five were dark. What did that mean? Would the golem weaken if all the oil vases were burning? That seemed like a common video game trick, but it didn't seem to fit in the world of *Unital Ring*, where everything usually had a clear cause and consequence. On top of that, five vases to set off a trap like that seemed way too low.

No, wait.

That's not it. You don't light them on fire. It's not the fire that matters—it's the oil inside the vases.

I bounded up off the floor and said, "Asuna, buy me one minute!"

"You got it!" she replied, and I turned to the rear line of the formation. "Come with me, Sinon!"

Sinon answered my summons, leaving her position to run toward the center of the chamber. Despite the difficult situation, she wore a grin of quiet confidence.

"Did you finally come up with an idea?"

"For now. Can you spot the five pots on the walls that *aren't* lit and shoot them all with your gun?"

"Excuse me? Well…if you want them broken, I can do that," Sinon said with considerable skepticism. But she readied her musket anyway.

The heavy pounding of the golem's attacks being blocked by the others was joined by the dry sound of gunshots.

Her first shot, delivered standing up, struck one of the unlit pots and shattered it. Oil gushed out, running down the wall and spreading onto the floor. She smoothly reloaded the gunpowder and bullet, then shot the next pot.

It took only thirty seconds for her to shatter all five pots. The oil that flooded out of them gathered in the center of the chamber, forming a puddle about twenty feet across.

So far it was going the way I'd hoped. Now I just had to find out if my theory was right.

"Nice shots, Sinon!" I cried, then turned back to give the rear row a new order. "Kuro, Aga! Attack the golem's leg once, then come over to my position!"

This was about as complex as you could make a command to your pet, but the two beasts rushed forward from their waiting spots to attack. Kuro took the golem's right leg, while Aga tore at the left foot with its claws as it rushed around the golem's side.

While this didn't draw any damage, either, it succeeded at grabbing the golem's attention. It roared with fury—or so it seemed—and began to chase them.

Waiting for the right timing, I eventually said, "Kuro, Aga, jump!"

The two nimbly leaped into the air, easily clearing the black, gleaming liquid and landing at my side. I waved a hand to brush them back, even as I pulled away with Sinon, too.

"*Gwooohnnnn!!*" the golem bellowed like a broken bell, through a mouth that did not actually open. It plunged forward in a straight line, large form leaning forward, raising its hands high, and pressing in to smash us flat.

A leg like a stone pillar plunged into the mass of oil.

The golem did not care in the slightest about the oil. It got through one step, then a second, but on the third step, it lost all grip on the floor and tumbled headfirst so spectacularly that it was actually airborne for an instant.

The rumbling this caused was enough to shake the entire room. Tons of oil splashed and lapped as the golem came to a stop, resting on its chest. While it could absorb tons of slashes, damage caused by its own weight was a problem it couldn't solve. Its HP bar began to drop before my eyes.

But that wasn't what I was after.

Because the golem fell forward, I couldn't see the bottoms of its feet. So I called out to my stunned companions watching from the other side.

"Guys, is there anything on the soles of the golem's feet?!"

"There is!!" cried Leafa, who was ready with her bastard sword next to Asuna. "There's a round metal plate thing stuck into the bottom of its right foot!"

I knew it. It wasn't my imagination that something shiny had reflected off the bottom of the golem's foot.

"That's its weak point! Attack it!" I instructed, only to add, "But don't step in the oil! You'll slip and won't be able to move properly!"

They had started running but came to a screeching halt after the latter comment. There was nearly six feet of space between the edge of the oil puddle and the bottom of the fallen golem's foot. That was a tough distance for a spear to bridge, much less a sword.

"*Gwoohnn*," the golem grunted, placing one hand on the ground. If it got up onto its feet, we would have to wait for it to fall again.

Damn, I should have thought of a method to attack the weak point without stepping in the oil first, I thought ruefully.

Just then, a silver flash shot through the eight-inch gap between Asuna and Leafa. Someone had thrown something metallic from behind them.

From my position, I couldn't see the bottom of the golem's foot, but I could certainly hear the high-pitched *clang!* The golem shrieked, "*Gwoa!*" in a different tone than before, and its huge body shook violently. More than 10 percent of its first HP bar melted away.

"I got ya covered on hitting the weak point! But you gotta hold its attention!" shouted Argo, sand-colored hooded cape drawn up

over her head, as she came running by. In her left hand were three pointy throwing weapons, much like the throwing picks I had used so often back in *SAO*.

"Since when did she…?" I murmured.

Thankfully, Sinon filled me in. "I think she had Liz make her some before they left."

"Lucky. Wish I had some…"

But I couldn't finish that sentence, because the golem was placing one hand on the floor again. Very quickly, it pushed its oil-slicked body upright and stood on its feet once more.

If we wanted it to fall again, we couldn't let the golem escape the puddle of oil. But that wouldn't be easy, either. What could we do…?

"If you don't have a ranged weapon, run counterclockwise around the oil puddle!" shouted Holgar, back in action with his longsword now that he was fully healed. Without stopping, he ran up to the oil spill and kept pace around the edge.

Everyone else, including myself, was briefly taken aback, but Asuna and Leafa were the quickest to respond, rushing after Holgar. The rest of the party joined in, aside from Argo and Yui.

"…Get going, pal," Sinon snapped, bringing me back to my senses.

"Oh…r-right. Keep hitting that weak spot," I said, and slid between Zarion and Friscoll. If the diameter of the oil pool was twenty-three feet, then the circumference would be somewhere over seventy feet. That was a very cramped space for ten people to run in laps, and the curve was much sharper than on the four-hundred-meter track at school. It was harder than I thought to run beside it at high speed, but I soon understood why Holgar suggested it.

Whomever the golem targeted out of the ten of us, it would be forced to rotate constantly within the puddle of oil. If it were normal solid ground beneath its feet, the monster would manage to get off an attack at some point, but now it had to contend with a slippery surface. The stone giant already had a high center of gravity, so what would happen when it tried to move forward while in a rotation?

The golem's feet slipped again, and it toppled over.

The ten of us promptly stopped and made space toward the direction its feet were pointing. Then the ranged attacker nearby—Sinon, in this case—took aim and shot at the weak point on the underside of the golem's foot.

The musket was much more powerful than the throwing pick, of course, and it knocked out nearly a third of the first HP bar. The ten of us resumed once the damage had been inflicted.

On the third fall, Argo hit it with a throwing pick, and on the fourth, it was Sinon again. The fifth time the golem fell, Yui was in the direction of its feet.

I assumed she was going to hit it with her fire magic specialty, but instead, Yui held a weapon I did not expect to see at all. In her hands was a small twenty-inch bow.

Before I even had time to be shocked, the string twanged. The arrow sank right into the center of the metallic plate embedded into the golem's sole.

With that, the first HP bar was gone.

A boss in Aincrad would change patterns once you got into its second health bar, and from what Lisbeth said, the gilnaris queen hornet that had guarded the way to this cave had been the same way.

But even on its second bar, the golem continued to rotate and slip, rotate and slip. Maybe it *did* have a secondary set of attacks, but Holgar's spinning strategy was so effective that it couldn't make use of them. Between Sinon's gun, Argo's picks, and Yui's arrows, we ground down the second HP bar just as quickly.

About fifteen minutes after I had first reached this chamber, the metal plate stuck under the golem's right foot shattered into fine pieces, just like glass.

With its HP gone, the golem—pardon me, the statue of Whatever-It-Was—gave one last bellow, deep and long, before falling eternally still. All of its joints detached, and the stone crumbled to the floor in chunks.

The first person to break the abrupt silence that followed, to my surprise, was Ceecee, the tiger beetle. "We did it!! Whoooo-hooooo!!"

The beetle raised her skinny arms and slapped Holgar on the back. Based on the rapid-fire stream of English that followed, it

seemed that Holgar's spinning maneuver was a big hit.

Klein and Friscoll celebrated and pumped their fists, while Sinon, Leafa, and Silica shared high fives, all smiles.

I wanted to ask Holgar why he said "counterclockwise," but that could come later. I slipped between my celebrating friends and rushed over to Yui. Asuna snuck past me along the way.

"Yui!" She scooped the girl up with both hands, bow and all. "That was incredible! When did you learn to use a bow?"

Yui just grinned happily. "This was a spoil of war from the gilnaris hornets' nest. I requested it when we were dividing up the loot."

"You mean…you only just got it a few hours ago?! And you can already use it that well?!" Asuna exclaimed. My mouth hung open. For some reason, Yui looked away and murmured under her breath so only we could hear.

"After a few test shots, I learned that when I use a bow, as long as my feet are steady, I have time to calculate trajectory, and if there are no spontaneous bursts of wind, I will never miss my target, apparently."

"……"

Once again, I was aghast.

The day after the log cabin had dropped into this world, I had spotted Yui practicing her swordsmanship against Alice. I'd thought she showed promise at the time, which implied that she was still a bit awkward. And yet she had mastered shooting a bow, which was much harder than using a sword, after just a few attempts?

Already anticipating my skepticism, Yui explained, "The action of swinging a sword requires a precise string of movements using the avatar's entire body, which is not something I can easily optimize. But shooting a bow means immobilizing most of the body and performing only a simple finger movement to release the string, so I can use nearly all my ability to calculate trajectory."

I thought, *Is it* really *that simple, though?*

I was a totally uncultured swine when it came to archery. I was aware of a Japanese school of thought, the Eight Pivots of Shooting, referring to eight very precise movements in the course

of shooting an arrow, from taking stance to releasing the string. But of course, that was all in the real world, and in the virtual world, maybe keeping your body as still as a statue increased your accuracy instead.

A simple measure of full-dive conformity—one's aptitude for the full-dive environment—was to stand on one leg for a number of seconds. If the signals coming from the brain weren't strong or precise enough, the avatar wouldn't be stable, and even if you could handle one leg fine at first, the minor differences in one's sense of balance and gravity in contrast to the real world would eventually cause most people to drop the other foot after twenty or thirty seconds.

But as an AI, Yui had no wavering brain signal or distortion of senses to worry about. She could probably stand on one foot indefinitely without any issue, and for the same reason, it was a piece of cake for her to hold her avatar totally still, if she wanted.

Yui had looked away uncomfortably earlier because she thought her ability was like cheating. And indeed, there were probably players who would say just that, if they heard about it. But Yui hadn't asked to be a *Unital Ring* player. She was dragged into this world against her will, and no one had the right to complain about her using the full extent of her abilities. No one.

I rubbed her head reassuringly. "Thank you, Yui. Your skill with the bow helped us beat that golem earlier. If you had shot a fire spell, it would've lit up the oil on the floor and burned us, too. Keep using that bow to help everyone out."

"…I will!" she said, beaming. Our companions were standing all around us and broke out into applause for her.

Once it died down, Lisbeth came up to me and handed me a pickax, for some reason. "Here you go."

"…Here I go…what? What is this?"

"Isn't it obvious? We're going to break up the remains of the golem and collect the contents. I'm sure we'll get some very nice ores! If anyone else has a pickax, help out!"

Asuna lowered Yui and opened her window, materializing a whole ton of fired pottery containers.

"If you don't have a pickax, help us scoop up the oil on the floor!"

I think these two are adapting to this world better than I am, I thought, resting the pickax against my shoulder and strolling over to where the golem's remains were strewn across the floor.

6

The seven-thirty bells rang their melody right as Alice finished eating her dessert.

When Eolyne had returned from the bath just ten minutes ago, he had eaten about 70 percent of his meal and apologized to Airy for leaving some behind. He hadn't eaten much at the restaurant they had stopped at before arriving at Central Cathedral, either. Maybe he just didn't have a big appetite in general.

At the restaurant, Alice had been so delighted to eat some good Centorian food again that she overdid it a little, and because she hadn't had a single coin to her name, it forced Eolyne to pay for the whole meal. She was mortified.

If she was going to continue visiting this world, she'd need a source of money of some kind, but she had no idea how she was going to get it. She couldn't go around chopping down trees for money with her Osmanthus Blade, the way she did back when she lived by Rulid.

Unconsciously, she touched the leather pouch fastened to her belt with her right hand. She'd been carrying this pouch on her at every moment since returning to the Underworld; it contained two fist-sized eggs. They belonged to her dragon mount, Amayori, who passed away during the Otherworld War, and its brother, Takiguri. Kirito had used Incarnation to rewind their state to before their deaths.

There were two reasons Alice had come back here. One was to be reunited with her sister, Selka, and that had been fulfilled.

The other was to help these two eggs hatch so that she could raise them to their former selves. This, too, was going to be an extremely difficult task. The eggs would eventually hatch if kept in a suitably warm environment, but dragons were a surprisingly sensitive animal and their young needed constant care. Alice

couldn’t stay here for months at a time, so she’d have to leave them to someone with appropriate knowledge, expertise, and care.

At that point, she recognized the reality she’d been afraid to face and bit her lip with consternation.

Even though she had been reunited with Selka at last, they couldn’t live together. The only reason they were even eating together like this was the mercy of Dr. Koujiro extending her visit past the five o’clock deadline. She could be pulled out at any time and couldn’t complain about it.

“What’s the matter, Alice?” Selka asked.

The mention of her name drew Alice’s distracted attention. “Oh, nothing…Would you like some more, Selka?”

She pulled the huge plate of shortcake pieces closer, but her sister just grimaced and shook her head.

“No, I’m full! What about you girls?” Selka asked.

Ronie merely smiled. “I don’t need any, either. You, Tiese?”

“……”

When she didn’t hear an answer, Alice looked over.

Tiese’s maple-red eyes were wavering with an uncertain light, looking off to her left. There was a large plate of baked sweets in that direction, but that wasn’t what she was staring at. It was the masked man drinking his cofil tea behind it: Commander Eolyne Herlentz.

Selka and Ronie outwardly accepted the explanation that Eolyne was a stranger who just so happened to look like Eugeo, but Tiese was having more difficulty believing it.

That made sense. Alice could count the number of times she had traded words with Eugeo on two hands, and even she had nearly shouted with shock when she first saw Eolyne at the mansion outside of North Centoria.

So it was impossible to blame Tiese, who had been Eugeo’s page at Swordcraft Academy, for feeling unnerved about the experience. For that matter, Selka and Ronie had to be feeling much the same way; they were just acting normal for Tiese’s benefit. There had to be all kinds of questions swirling around inside their heads.

As for Eolyne himself, he seemed to be lost in thought. That

made sense, too. The existence of a rebel force had only been theoretical for so long. Getting extremely concrete proof of them had to be a major shock to his system.

It was Airy's calm voice that broke the awkward silence. "Has everyone finished their meal?"

"Ah…yes. Thank you, Lady Airy. I mean, Airy. It was delicious," Alice said. Selka and Ronie followed, and finally Tiese and Eolyne came back to their senses to thank her for the meal as well.

After the table was cleared, Eolyne, Stica, and Laurannei returned to the base. The girls complained that they wanted to stay overnight at the cathedral, but the all-day pass they'd been given by their superior officer was only valid until nine o'clock, when the space force base closed its gates, and if they were even a single minute late, they could be subject to a disciplinary hearing.

Even still, Laurannei persisted in arguing that the military's commander in chief and commander of the Integrity Pilots should be able to extend the valid time, but Eolyne would not assent. While he was not subject to any of these rules, he, too, would be scolded by his vice commander for staying out without any contact.

While she could sit out the argument, Alice was reminded of the old commander and vice commander of the Integrity Knights, Bercouli and Fanatio. Freewheeling Bercouli had often been scolded by Fanatio, too. It was a surprise to her that they'd had a child together, and now their distant descendant was the chairman of the Stellar Unification Council, with Eolyne as his foster son. The connections that bound people were very strange, indeed.

Ultimately, Stica and Laurannei had to give up on the idea of staying at the cathedral, so everyone went down to the eightieth floor. The great doors leading to the levitation shaft closed again the instant they removed the four swords that unlocked them. But there was a hidden lever on the wall to the right of the doors, and Airy was able to open the doors again with it.

Once the two pilots and their commander had descended the disc out of sight, the others shut the doors again and returned to the ninety-fifth floor.

After the Otherworld War, the levitating platform had been automated, and the shaft had been expanded to go from the first to ninetieth floors, as opposed to the fiftieth to eightieth, as it had been before. But because the highest floors were sealed, it was once again limited to the eightieth floor—and to even get to that floor, you needed to press a hidden button using Incarnation.

So reaching the Cloudtop Garden, Great Bath, and Morning Star Lookout required taking story after story of stairs. Even going back to the Axiom Church days, however, Alice had not minded this so much. Taking step after step on the red-carpeted stairs caused all the stray thoughts in her mind to melt away and allowed her a chance to truly appreciate the grand scale of Central Cathedral.

Of course, the holiness and infallibility of Administrator, who the massive white tower was meant to embody, had turned out to be an utter lie. Even still, Alice was unable to hate the tower itself. Kirito the Star King should have been able to tear it down if he wanted, but he chose it to be the headquarters for the Human Unification Council, and in his later years, he and Asuna used it as their retirement retreat. What was his reasoning…?

Before she knew it, she was on the ninety-fifth floor. The starry sky was visible past the trees that lined the space.

"Airy, it's December now, isn't it? If there are no walls here, why isn't the air cold?" Alice asked.

Airy glanced down at her feet. "The trees block the wind, and the pipes embedded in the floor carry warm water from the heater on the ninety-fourth floor."

"Heater…"

The word sounded familiar. In a moment, Alice recalled a conversation with Phercy, Laurannei's little brother, at the Arabel mansion in Centoria, where he had explained the workings of heaters and coolers.

I'll need to pay a visit to him soon, so we can uncover the reason why he's unable to perform an ultimate technique, she thought, crouching to touch the marble floor. There was indeed a faint heat emanating from it. She stood up and asked, "There wasn't a mechanism like this here in the past, was there?"

"Correct. It was the Star Queen who installed it. She called it

floor heating."

"Ah, so it was Asuna's doing." Alice chuckled.

She looked around once more. Nearby, Selka, Tiese, and Ronie, holding Natsu yet again, were lined up and staring at the sky. A quietly blinking orange light in the direction they were looking must have been the exhaust from a large dragoncraft flying from Centoria to somewhere else.

Ronie and Tiese had told Kirito that they would return to their knight's duties, but the only times Kirito would be able to visit this world would be Saturdays and Sundays in the real world. Now that they had been unfrozen, they would have to continue living their lives like everyone else, but what would their official status be? They couldn't just walk up to the front door of the Arabel and Schtrinen families and claim to be their ancestors. The same was true for Selka.

She started to wonder if Kirito—the Star King—had actually considered these details when helping freeze the three of them.

At that moment, Airy began to inhale and exhale deeply, for some reason.

She announced, "I believe that I will now complete my final duty as the guardian of the sealed floors."

The others swung around to stare at her.

"Your final duty…? What do you mean, Airy?" asked Selka.

Quietly, the woman replied, "I must ask you to make a choice."

Airy escorted them to the northeast corner of the Morning Star Lookout.

It looked totally empty at first, but after Airy pressed a button hidden on a nearby pillar, a circular staircase descended from the high ceiling and touched down on the floor.

Alice recalled that, two hundred years ago, there had been stairs on the north side of the floor, but that location was now occupied by the jutting wings of the X'rphan Mk. 13. If they were going to move the stairs, why treat it like a hidden trick staircase? And she still didn't know what this "choice" was that Airy was going to offer them.

Despite her many questions, Alice followed Airy up the spiral stairs.

Above them was the ninety-sixth floor. Even the senior Integrity Knights had not been allowed to enter it without permission. What even was there? She found the answer right as her boots made contact with the floor at the top of the stairs.

The ninety-sixth floor had been host to the senate. Human beings whose lives had been frozen, and whose emotions and thoughts had been ripped away, were placed in countless boxes affixed to the walls and treated like living monitoring devices that searched all over the entire human realm for violators of the Taboo Index.

Alice thought she heard a hoarse voice rasp, *System Call…*, and flinched horribly. She nearly shut her eyes in fear but forced them open. The entire floor was shrouded in darkness, revealing nothing.

Right in front of her, there was a faint clicking sound. Then a dim light appeared, far overhead, bringing light to the area.

The structure was entirely different from the senate of two centuries ago. There was a very wide hallway, about ten mels across, with a number of storeroom-like spaces on either side. The ceiling was very high up, too, reminding her of the dragon landing platform that used to be on the thirtieth floor. A bit farther on from the top of the stairs was a stone pillar that seemed to be a control panel, at which Airy was standing.

"Keep moving, Alice." A poke came at her back, which startled her into moving a few steps forward. Selka came up behind her, then rotated in place, staring.

"…Ahhh, I see. They outfitted this to be their bedchambers," she said, which Alice did not quite understand. Selka moved on, and Ronie and Tiese rose to the top of the steps, looked momentarily surprised, then continued after her.

Alice moved onward, too, and peered into the first side area on the right.

"…Oh!" she gasped.

It looked like the dragon landing—in fact, it *was*. Curled up and sleeping inside the shack-sized partition was a huge dragon. But its scales, which should have had a metallic luster all over, were now as gray and faded as stone.

For an instant, she thought it might have been remains, rather

than just a sleeping dragon—but then she realized that it was simply petrified, the same way that Selka and the others had been.

She did an about-face and saw another dragon sleeping in the partition on the other side of the hall. Each partition was about six mels wide, and the hallway itself was a little under fifty mels, which she calculated as holding eight chambers to a side, sixteen in total. Was each one playing home to a dragon…?

"Tsukigake!" "Shimosaki!" two voices called out in unison, drawing Alice's attention to the hallway. Tiese and Ronie rushed over to compartments near the middle of the room.

Alice hurried over, too, eager to see. Tiese was at the left side of two adjacent partitions, with Ronie on the right. Each of them had thrown her arms around a petrified dragon's neck.

"…Are those their dragons?" she asked Selka quietly.

Her sister nodded demonstrably. "Yes. That's Tiese's Shimosaki on the left, and Ronie's Tsukigake to the right."

"Ahhh…"

This morning, she had noticed the disappearance of the dragon stables from Central Cathedral's front grounds. She'd asked Eolyne what happened to the dragons, and he said, "At the same time the knighthood was sealed away, half of the dragons being kept at Central Cathedral were sent back to their habitat in Wesdarath, while the other half were sealed along with the knights."

She hadn't understood what he meant by "sealed," which referred to the state of being frozen in stone. Like with Selka's trio, the right sacred art formula would bring them back to life.

At that particular point in time, Alice sucked in a sharp breath.

Eolyne had said that Integrity Knights were sealed away, just like the dragons.

But…that would mean…

"Lady Tiese, Lady Ronie," Airy said gently. "We are going to a higher floor. What will you do?"

Ronie, who had Natsu riding on her shoulder, looked back just a little and said in a hoarse voice, "We'll stay here for a bit. Don't worry—we'll catch up soon."

"Very well," Airy replied, bowing. She looked at Alice. "Shall we go now, Lady Alice and Lady Selka?"

She headed down the hallway. Alice shared a look with Selka before hurrying after her.

At the end of the hallway, there was an upward-opening door shutter, like at the dragon landing area. Next to it was a human-sized door. They followed Airy inside and found another staircase.

This one was another three floors' worth of height. As they settled into the long climb, Alice consulted her memory of having been here.

The old senate chamber had occupied from the ninety-sixth floor to the ninety-eighth, as well. But it wasn't as large as this, and Prime Senator Chudelkin's chamber had been hidden away where this staircase room was. There had been a very narrow staircase there that went all the way up to the ninety-ninth floor…

The place where Alice had once awakened without any memories following the Synthesis Ritual.

And the place where Eugeo fought Kirito after he, too, had been synthesized into an Integrity Knight.

Airy opened the door at the end of the staircase and disappeared through it. For just an instant, Alice hesitated before walking through it. This floor, too, was locked in total darkness, so she couldn't see a single mel before her eyes.

Suddenly, a white light sprang into existence. Airy had silently generated a number of light elements. The hovering lights lit up the surrounding area.

As Alice had remembered, it was an absolutely white room.

It was perfectly circular, with a diameter of about thirty mels. The floor and ceiling were polished white marble, without a single fixture of any kind. That much was the same as the previous time she saw it, but now there were things that hadn't been there before.

Along the curved wall, spaced at intervals of about six mels, were sixteen stone statues.

Alice managed to stumble forward before she simply toppled over, then she made her way to one of the statues.

It had long, gently flowing hair. Full-body armor in a style very similar to the kind Alice had left back at the mansion. Her face, eyes closed and serene, was stunningly beautiful, even in stone.

Alice took another unsteady step and called out the statue's

name in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

"……Lady Fanatio……"

7

Fortunately, there was no second boss before the exit of the staircase dungeon.

Including the battle with the golem, we climbed a total of six hundred feet inside the earth-enclosed tower in only an hour before leaving through the half-crumbled great doors on the other end.

The damp night breeze caressed my face. Up in the sky, a scythe-like crescent of white hung over a pitch-black curtain.

I looked around. The torchlight alone didn't show much, but I could tell that the area was grassland that rose and fell slowly. The rest of the raid party members followed us up out of the staircase's exit, a stone enclosure that looked like old ruins. It reminded me of the exits from the staircases between floors in Aincrad.

"All right, people! Ten-minute break! If you wanna log out and use the restroom, now's the time!" shouted Holgar, the leader. A few people took a knee and opened their ring menus. The instant they hit the LOG OUT button, their avatars slumped lifelessly. I thought I was used to the way *Unital Ring* did not remove a player's avatar after logging out, but it was still a bit nerve-racking to see so many of my companions looking utterly comatose like this.

Obviously, the rest of the gang couldn't read my mind, but Klein walked over anyway and kicked at the ground, as though testing it out, just in case.

"Hey, Kiri, is this *really* the second tier of *UR*?"

"I don't know why you're asking me…"

"Well, fine, point taken. But it just doesn't feel real…I figured there would at least be an obvious difference in the environment graphics, or some cute NPC girls to congratulate us…"

"……"

If Agil were here, he would have pulled Klein aside at that moment and said, *Congratulations!* in his beautiful baritone voice, but Dicey Café was hosting a party that was renting the place out, so both he and his wife, Hyme, were out this evening.

After a bit of thought, I said, "Come over here," and dragged him behind the staircase enclosure. It took less than sixty feet to reach the sight—no, the *vista*—I expected to see.

The ground simply vanished up ahead, as cleanly and totally as though God's knife had cut it loose.

Below was forest and grassland, glowing in the pale moonlight, as far as the eye could see.

"Hooooooly…crap…"

Klein marveled at the view and started to approach the sheer cliff edge for a better look, until I quickly reached out and grabbed him by the back of his bandana.

"Hey, chill! You fall, you're dead!"

"I know, I know. It's just…man, what a view…"

"Now you can believe that we're on the second tier, though, right?" I said, equally blown away by the sight before us.

The entire stretch directly below, covering probably hundreds of square miles, was the Great Zelletelio Forest, the base of our adventures over the past six days. A little blob of orange light visible from here had to be good old Ruis na Ríg.

Farther off in the distance was the surface of the Maruba River, shining with reflected moonlight. And much, much farther off, glowing vaguely in the distance, was the Stiss Ruins, the starting point for all *ALO* players. Just in front of the ruins, a sharp, dark silhouette to the east of it was the fallen castle of New Aincrad.

Given the vast size of it, even with the bottom quarter crushed flat, the distance from the ground to the tip had to be well over twenty thousand feet. It was a massive structure that we were still looking up at, even from the distant second tier, and there were no lights on it.

When we traveled to the Stiss Ruins, Alice was in the party, and she worried about what had happened to the NPCs who lived in the castle. It was concerning, and at the time, I had wanted to investigate when I had the chance, but it had been four days

since then.

When our exploration of the second tier has calmed down a bit, we'll head back to New Aincrad, I thought, making a note in my mental schedule.

"All right, time for the meeting!" Holgar shouted in the distance, drawing my attention. I took one last look at Ruis na Ríg, then shuffled back two steps before turning around.

"Welp, guess it's time for one more shift at the adventurin' factory," Klein said, stretching luxuriously.

"Time to clock in," I agreed, and trotted back to the rest of our companions.

According to Argo, who continued proving to be an all-around excellent info dealer in *Unital Ring*, and Friscoll, a spy from Mutasina's army, the second tier was roughly split into four areas.

The west and east areas were forest terrain. The north area was snowy terrain. And the south area, where we were, was grassland terrain.

Each area had a number of smaller villages and at least one midsize town. NPCs lived in these villages and towns, which could be valuable waypoints on the route to the land revealed by the heavenly light, but at the moment, all NPCs were extremely hostile and would apparently attack you as soon as you got anywhere near their homes.

At that point in Argo's lecture, Leafa raised her hand and shouted, "Ooh, ooh! But the only factions that are ahead of us are *Asuka Empire* and *Apocalyptic Date*, right? What if they just messed up their first contact opportunity, and it's not that *all* NPCs are hostile by default? Is that possible?"

"Of course it's possible," Argo said. She scooped up a nearby dead branch and used it to sketch out a model of the world of *Unital Ring* on the ground.

"The *Asuka* team is makin' their way through the northern snowy region, on the opposite side of the map from us. *AD* is in the forest region to the west. *Asuka*'s on the far side o' the world, and the *AD* base is hundreds o' miles away, so we can't make direct contact inside the game. Everything I've told you is secondhand and thirdhand information I got in the real world…so

it's not all that reliable," Argo explained, shrugging.

Friscoll took over. "My info about *Asuka* and *AD* is about the same, but there's one curious thing I heard about…Lately, a bunch of folks in *ALO* starter gear have shown up around the Stiss Ruins, asking lots of newbie questions."

"…And how does that relate to *Asuka* and *AD*?" Sinon asked.

Friscoll spread his hands. "This is just my personal theory, but I wonder if they're *Asuka* or *AD* spies."

"Spies…?"

That ominous word caused concern to visibly take hold of Zarion and Ceecee, who were receiving real-time interpretation from Asuna.

It seemed unbelievable to me, but it wasn't impossible.

At present, *ALO*'s management company wasn't accepting any new registrations, but following the rules of The Seed Nexus, as long as the server was running, no game could refuse a character conversion from a different game. In other words, players from *Asuka Empire* or *Apocalyptic Date* could convert abandoned characters they had previously made on other accounts into *ALO*, thus "making" new characters they could send into the Stiss Ruins hundreds of miles away as spies.

But would the factions currently in the lead really go to those lengths to find out more about the status of the *ALO* faction? Once converted, those characters were useless for anything other than collecting information.

Friscoll could practically read my mind, though; he looked at me and grinned. "Kirito here might be underrating our humble group, but I think both *Asuka* and *AD* are wary of *ALO*—specifically, Kirito's team. Not just because of our waypoint of Ruis na Ríg, but because the leader is *the* famous Kirito."

"…Just so we're clear, I'm not *the* anything, and I don't remember claiming this raid party should be called Kirito Team or anything like that," I announced.

For some reason, Sinon gave me a very smug, "It's too late for that now. If you really want a different name for us, you'll have to list some suggestions."

"……"

Well aware that I was terrible at coming up with names, I

could only grit my teeth and groan. The rest of the group burst into laughter.

Three minutes later, we had come to the collective agreement to avoid approaching any NPC settlements we found and to withdraw if attacked first, without retribution. We refilled our TP and SP before moving onward.

The faint trail from the staircase enclosure headed north. It was exactly ten o'clock, the time of night when things were just getting really started, but having arisen at four o'clock this morning to travel to Roppongi and go on a huge adventure in the Underworld, I was definitely feeling the fatigue now.

Asuna was under the same circumstances, however, and she was sticking it out, plus I had gotten an extra thirty minutes or so of sleep thanks to Kikuoka's car ride. *You can do this!* I told myself, and started walking.

The monsters in the grassland at night were all animal types, such as hyena-like carnivores, gazelle-like herbivores, and surprisingly speedy tortoises. But true to their billing as second-stage foes, they were all clearly stronger than the ones in the Zelletelio Forest.

And yet we were doing more with our time than just focusing on town-building. Sinon and I were over level-20, others like Leafa and Silica were level-18 or level-19, and even the latecomers like Asuna, Argo, and Klein had reached level-16 or level-17. It hurt not to have Alice, who was so effective on offense, but we still managed to defeat all monsters without running into trouble, and after thirty minutes of travel, we reached a point where the grassland ended.

The path gently descended toward a river at least sixty feet across, which flowed from northeast to southwest. On the far bank of the river were the silhouettes of what seemed to be multiple buildings. Not a single light was lit, and the majority of the roofs and walls were collapsed, so it seemed this was a ruin, not an active settlement.

Of course, we didn't know that for sure, and even if there were no residents, there could still be monsters there, so caution was required. If we wanted to check it out, however, we would still have to get across the river.

Argo and Ceecee went first, and once we confirmed that there was no danger in the sand or water, the rest of the group descended to the waterside. Kuro stuck its snout into the river to drink, while Aga just leaped into the water to swim across. The fact that it could do so meant the water was significantly deep here.

Upon a closer look, the path we were following met the river at the remains of what seemed to be bridge girders. There had probably once been a grand bridge here, but it had been destroyed long ago, like the ruins on the far bank. But was it caused by a natural disaster or by someone else?

"This river seems dangerous for us to try swimming across," murmured Asuna, who was watching Aga cross the river's length.

"True. I don't see any aquatic monsters so far, but there's got to be at least six feet of depth in the middle, and it's flowing fast…"

"Meaning we've got to build either a bridge or a boat."

"The bridge will have a high cost, so I'd like a boat instead, but you need sawed thick logs for that. And there are no large trees around here," I pointed out, looking around.

While this was primarily grassland, it wasn't as if there were *no* trees whatsoever. Most of them, however, were short and shrub-like, and I hadn't seen a single large, proud tree yet. When I went to the Stiss Ruins with Alice, we made a crude large dugout canoe. Was that in my inventory? I started to go to my menu to check, then remembered it was too heavy to fit; we had left it moored on the bank of the Maruba River.

So the grassland was easy to traverse, and we didn't struggle for water or food, but it had the downside of making wood and stone materials hard to come by. In *Unital Ring*, you needed wood and stone to build anything, so if we wanted to build something on the scale of Ruis na Ríg here, that was going to be a major struggle.

To that end, the *Apocalyptic Date* faction proceeding through a forest zone had a major advantage. It also made me wonder how snowy it was in the north, where the *Asuka Empire* people were active.

I was lost in thought when I heard two sets of footsteps

approaching from behind. Asuna and I turned around together.

"Do you have a minute?" asked Holgar, who was accompanied by Friscoll. They were looking not at me, but at Asuna.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He sounded apologetic. "Well, if possible…we were hoping that your pet might help us cross the river. We're really short on resources to build either a bridge or a boat."

"Help you…Oh, you mean by having Aga take people over on its back one at a time?"

"Exactly."

Friscoll added, "There aren't many trees 'round here, and if we start gathering material for a bridge or boat, it'll take at least an hour. That lizard seems to be a good swimmer, and we were thinking it might be able to take one person at a time."

"Ah yes…"

Asuna watched Aga swim effortlessly through the water. It looked less like a lizard and more like some massive waterfowl, and it didn't seem like it would have trouble carrying a single person across. The issue was what would happen if a problem arose—the player would get washed away, not Aga. Most likely, somewhere downstream was a waterfall that would drop you six hundred feet to the first tier again, so if you couldn't climb out before then, you were going to die.

I would have preferred to test this plan in a different body of water first, but there was no time. If only there was some safety device we could prepare…

"I'll test it, then!" said Yui, hopping out from behind Holgar and Friscoll with her hand raised.

"What?! N—"

Asuna swallowed the word *no* before it could escape her mouth. She must have determined that it wasn't a good idea to simply forbid Yui from doing everything without giving her a chance.

I wasn't thrilled about the idea, either, but if anyone was going to be a test pilot, Yui would be ideal as the lightest member here. Even still, I wanted a safety measure. On the fourth floor of Aincrad, Asuna and I had inner tubes, but that alone would not be safe now. Even if you avoided drowning with the inner tube, it

wouldn’t help if you still sailed over the falls.

Asuna surely saw the same downsides, but she shook it off, opened her menu, and materialized a coil of thin rope. It wasn’t the crude ubiquigrass rope that had played such a key role in the game so far, but a rope made of much finer white fibers.

“What’s that?”

“I made this rope out of thread that Needy spat up for me,” she replied.

I was briefly shocked. Needy was one of the *Insectsite* Sixes who came to Ruis na Ríg with Zarion. He was a type of cricket and could eject tough thread from his mouth. Needy was the one who had tied up Friscoll (who had been a spy for Mutasina’s army at the time), so any rope made from his threads was sure to be plenty tough.

First, Asuna had Yui stash her equipment into storage, then tied the rope tight around her in a bowline knot. “If you fall into the water, don’t panic, Yui. We’ll be sure to pull you back to shore.”

“Yes, Mama!” Yui cried. We called Aga over and had it hunch at the water’s edge. I picked Yui up and placed her on Aga’s back. We hadn’t tested riding the agamid before, but its skeletal structure was conveniently concave near the front, making it an ideal place to sit.

Yui clung to the base of Aga’s neck, while Asuna took a few steps back, holding the other end of the rope. She watched the far side of the river. I looked there, too, and into the water itself, but didn’t see anything that suggested monsters.

Satisfied, Asuna gave her pet its orders. “Aga, swim slowly to the other side of the river, without dunking underwater!”

“*Quak!*” it cried confidently and began to swim without so much as a splash. It paddled through the water with limbs and tail, keeping its back exposed to the air. Eventually, it reached the midpoint, where it nimbly adjusted its propulsion and continued swimming with almost no pushback from the water’s flow. The length of the rope didn’t seem like it was going to be a problem.

Every one of our old friends was aware that Yui was an AI, but we hadn’t told Holgar or Zarion yet. How did they see the fact that Yui had the appearance of a little girl and called me and

Asuna "Papa" and "Mama"? Surely they didn't assume she was a real child, but what other interpretation was there?

While I was distracted by these thoughts, the girl and agamid continued their journey, and they finished crossing the sixty-foot-plus river in less than thirty seconds. When Aga climbed onto the far bank, Yui slid off its back and waved to us, beaming. Aside from the hem of her dress getting wet, it seemed like there hadn't been any trouble worth mentioning.

"Thanks, Yui! Can you undo the rope?" Asuna called out.

Yui said, "Uh-huh!" and without much trouble, undid the rope that Asuna used all her strength to tie on.

That made it possible for Asuna to pull it back across the river. "Just wait there for a little bit! Aga, come on back!"

The giant agamid quacked and jumped back into the water. This time it dived down and used its full body to swim, making the trip back in less than half the time.

"Okay, I think this'll work. Are you next, Kirito?" Holgar asked. For a moment, I wavered. I wanted to get over there to help Yui, but she might not want me to treat her like an eternal child who needed protection. Yui had proven that she was a full-fledged warrior equipped with smarts and bravery of her own.

"…Nah, I'll go later. Let's start with the lightest. Silica or Argo should be next…"

I glanced over at my companions—but at that moment, Kuro suddenly stood up and growled a warning.

"…?!"

I followed its gaze to the other side of the river. Yui was looking back our way in her white dress, confused.

Over her right shoulder, the grasses parted—and a human-sized shadow leaped forth and began racing right for Yui.

"Yui!!"

"Oh no, Yui!!" Asuna cried.

Yui was already on the move. A human player would have turned around and tried to see their attacker first, but she just started running without a second thought. She must have realized that, with everything unequipped, she couldn't fight back, so jumping into the river and swimming was her better option.

That was probably the optimal choice in this scenario. But the

pursuer reached Yui with unimaginable speed, reached out with an arm that was much longer than it should have been, and grabbed the collar of her dress.

She had jumped out over the water, but the hand pulled her backward. At last, I could see the figure of her attacker in the moonlight.

Its pelt was all black hair. Its freakishly long arms held Yui tight, and its equally long tail swung back and forth.

It was a monkey. Its build was clearly not human, so I assumed it was an actual monster and not a player wearing furs. But while it had Yui in its grasp, it was not attacking her. If it harmed her HP bar in any way, that would flip the *hostile* flag and allow me and all the other party members to see its spindle cursor, but it was almost like it was purposefully avoiding that.

The monkey readjusted its grasp on the struggling Yui, shot a glance at us on the other side—and turned tail, racing off downstream along the river.

Blam! Sinon shot at the monkey with her musket. But the shot only kicked up sand near its feet and did not seem to have hit the target. It was likely she was unable to get off an ideal shot for fear of hitting Yui.

But at least the gunshot had the power to undo the paralysis that had taken control of me.

"Asuna, get on Aga!" I shouted, straddling Kuro. I gave it the order to go, and the panther bolted at top speed.

Over my shoulder, I could see Asuna leaning over Aga like a jockey on a racehorse. Even on land, the giant agamid was more or less as fast as Kuro.

The monkey that kidnapped Yui was about thirty yards ahead on the far bank. If it were the black-haired monkey alone in the darkness, I might have lost sight of it, but Yui's white dress picked up the moonlight and made it possible to follow them.

"We're leaving her up to you, Kirito!" shouted Lisbeth from the rear.

We're going to save her! There's no other option! I swore to myself, hunching as low as possible to reduce every last bit of air resistance.

8

"It was in the year 441 of the Human Era, sixty years after the founding of the Unification Council, when the second commander of the council's sacred artificers brigade, Selka Zuberg, along with the Integrity Knights Tiese Schtrinen Thirty-Two and Ronie Arabel Thirty-Three, entered a very, very long sleep in this place.

"That was the year the hallowed Integrity Knighthood was disbanded, and the similar Integrity Pilothood was established in its place. The knights could either transfer into becoming pilots, complete their duty and live freely, or choose of their own accord to undergo the Deep Freeze art and be put to sleep.

"There were Integrity Knights who chose to become pilots, Integrity Knights who chose to find a new life, and many Integrity Knights who chose to be frozen. After some time, in the year 475 HE, Fanatio chose sleep after serving Their Majesties the longest… and three years later, the Star King and Queen chose to relinquish all their authority to the Human Unification Council and abdicated the throne."

When Alice reunited with Airy at the Cloudtop Garden nine hours earlier, that was how Airy had conveyed the events that had led to the end of the Integrity Knights' historical record.

At the time, Alice's head had been so full of thoughts about Selka that she hadn't had the leeway to think about any of the other knights, but now that she saw them all petrified like this, she did find emotion rising to her throat.

The Otherworld War had ended in November of 380 HE, so for nearly a century after Alice left for the real world, Fanatio had helped Kirito and Asuna maintain the Underworld and assist its progress. What must have been going through her head when she chose indefinite sleep in this chamber?

Faint footsteps approached. Alice turned to see Airy, hands folded in front of her apron, staring right at her with eyes the color of the predawn sky. Her lips moved, emitting a sound with the slightest of echoes.

"His Majesty and Her Majesty left me a message to give to you, Lady Alice. They said that if you should return to this world, and the time came to awaken Lady Selka, Tiese, and Ronie, you should discuss with them whether or not to undo the seal upon the Integrity Knights."

"…And is that the 'choice' you mentioned earlier?"

"Correct."

Alice turned away from Airy to look at Fanatio again.

The vice commander of the Integrity Knights, who had once hidden her face at all times behind a helmet fashioned after a bird of prey and slain countless enemies with the Heaven-Piercing Blade, wore an expression of peaceful release from pressure. If Fanatio had chosen the deep freeze after feeling that she had completed every last duty upon her shoulders, then Alice could not disturb her sleep for selfish personal reasons.

She pulled away from Fanatio and headed left.

Standing next to her was a male knight whom Alice did not recognize. This was probably one of the knights in the single digits who'd already been frozen away somewhere in Central Cathedral by the pontifex's hand before Alice awoke as an Integrity Knight.

Next to him was a woman, another knight Alice had never met. But as soon as she saw the fourth face, she gasped. That imposing face could only belong to Deusolbert Synthesis Seven, user of the Conflagration Bow.

Knowing his meticulous nature, Alice figured it had to have been endlessly exhausting having to deal with Kirito's freewheeling nature. That made her hesitate to bring him back to life, for a different reason than with Fanatio.

What should I do, Sir Deusolbert? she asked in her mind, just as new footsteps approached from the stairs.

She spun around to see Tiese and Ronie, the latter with Natsu on her shoulder.

They had guessed what was on the ninety-ninth floor, then.

After gazing around the pure-white room under the light elements' glow, they headed to one particular location with purpose.

Alice hesitated, then followed them. After a point, Ronie stopped, leaving Tiese to continue farther, toward a small, slumbering knight…

"…Sir Renly…," she murmured, and then understood.

The man whom Tiese had married and whose children she bore. Renly Synthesis Twenty-Seven, wielder of the Double-Winged Blades.

Tiese stopped in front of Renly, traced his stone cheek with a finger, and said something to him, though Alice couldn't hear what it was.

She lined up next to Ronie and stared at Tiese's back. Neither Selka nor Airy offered any comment. Even Natsu, who had been noisy even in the quietest of moments, seemed to understand that now was not the time.

Beyond the thick walls, a bell-like sound tolled faintly.

On that cue, Tiese pulled away from Renly and walked back to where Alice and Ronie stood.

Her expression was peaceful, but it seemed like there were notes of loneliness and uncertainty in the mourning in her eyes. Alice wanted to say something, but she couldn't. The weight of all the time Tiese had lived was too heavy upon her.

Recognizing Alice's awkward position, Tiese took pity on her with a trace of a smile. "Lady Alice, thank you for protecting the Underworld. Because of you, Renly and I were able to lead happy lives, not just as knights, but as people and as parents."

"…You were the ones who protected the Underworld. All I could do was flee from Emperor Vecta…," Alice managed to say.

Ronie stepped forward and turned around to face Alice, shaking her head. "That's not true. In the Battle of the Eastern Gate, it was the way you shouldered the weight of being the human army's light of hope that helped us survive that day. And after the Otherworld War, during the Rebellion of the Four Empires and the Black Emperor War, many knights and men-at-arms fought with the inspiration you gave them."

"Black Emperor War…?" Alice repeated, sounding out the

unfamiliar term. At the very least, she had never heard it from Stica, Laurannei, or Eolyne.

"It's the fight against the Black Emperors, Alice," Selka said helpfully, which only deepened the mystery. But before Alice could pepper her with more questions, Selka asked Airy, "By the way, what *did* happen with the Black Emperor War?"

"Roughly thirty years after you went to sleep, Lady Selka, in 475 HE, the final Black Emperor was vanquished. Only the Abyssal Horror succeeded in escaping as a shard of its former self."

The year 475 was when Fanatio had been frozen. Perhaps seeing the Black Emperor War to its conclusion was her cue to submit to the Deep Freeze art.

"Thirty years…," Tiese murmured. She approached Airy and placed her hands over the other woman's. "I'm sorry I couldn't fight with you to the end, Airy."

"There is no need to apologize. You and Lady Ronie and Selka achieved many great honors in the course of the Black Emperor War."

At last, Alice could no longer hold back her curiosity. She asked, "Tiese, did you receive the life-freezing art because Sir Renly did the same?"

"Yes, that's right," Tiese admitted. She explained, "The reason the four emperors raised their flags in rebellion against the Axiom Church is because they wanted the life-freezing art for themselves. Ronie and I always felt that the eternal life such a thing created was in violation of the laws of the universe, and we did not want to receive something that had been the rationale for a terrible war. But…"

She trailed off, and Ronie continued the story.

"…As a basic rule, Administrator chose to allow knights whom she synthesized young to reach their maximum life value before she utilized the art of life-freezing. Only Fizel, Linel, and Renly were frozen in age at the same time that they were synthesized. Even after we were married and had children, Renly remained young in appearance, but Tiese got older and older… When I realized this was starting to cause real problems for them, I went to Kirito and begged him to bring back the life-freezing art. Even if it was against the laws of the universe, I hoped that it would

help Tiese and Renly be happy forever. That was when he told me that Lady Ayuha and Selka had actually succeeded in bringing back the life-freezing art…"

Attention turned to Selka, who looked a bit uncomfortable. "I didn't keep it a secret of my own accord. In order to bring back the petrification art, we first needed to revive the life-freezing art, which is its basis…But when we were first successful, Lady Ayuha said that it would lead people astray and that we should tell no one but Kirito and Lady Asuna."

"I'm not criticizing you, Selka. It sounds just like something Lady Ayuha would say," Ronie admitted, grinning with fond memory.

Alice asked softly, "Ayuha didn't use the life-freezing art…on herself?"

"Not as far as I know. Lady Ayuha was always concerned about you, Lady Alice. She always said that you were her sacred arts teacher."

"Teacher…? I never taught her anything…"

"That's not true. The formula for Hollow Sphere Shape, which you taught to Lady Ayuha, she taught to Lady Asuna, and then to me and Selka and Airy. If not for that formula, Airy claimed that we would not have been able to develop a stable sealed canister for eternal-heat elements."

Airy nodded gravely. "That is correct. Of the many, many sacred arts formulas, it is my favorite, after the one to unleash wind elements."

"Now you're just exaggerating…"

Alice felt awkward. She had discovered the Hollow Sphere Shape formula, it was true, but it was really a rather simple form of sacred arts, forming a hollow three-dimensional sphere with steel and crystal elements. On the other hand, it didn't feel bad knowing that the sacred arts formula she had left behind two centuries ago was now the cornerstone of all kinds of devices here today, from indoor heating and cooling to dragoncraft propulsion. Especially because the formula had been developed for the reflective-cohesion-beam art that was meant to cause merciless slaughter.

"I'm very happy to hear you say that, though. Thank you,"

Alice said, beaming at Airy. "So I understand why Tiese underwent the life-freezing art. And you and Selka did it at the same time as Tiese?"

"Yes. We're friends," said Ronie at once.

Selka nodded, too. "That's right, Alice. And in my case, I also hoped that I would see you again someday."

It must have been a very difficult decision, in fact, but Selka said it with such a confident smile that Alice wanted to grab her and hug her fiercely right there.

So that explained why the three of them had frozen their life amount right in their mid-twenties.

After that, Selka worked with Ayuha to bring back the petrification art, and after many years of work, they succeeded. About fifty years later, in the year 441 HE, Selka went into a long, long sleep in the Cloudtop Garden with Tiese and Ronie. At the same time, Renly and the other knights were given the choice to be frozen in the ninety-ninth-floor chamber of their own accord, to join the new Integrity Pilots, or to quit and find a new way of life. In 475 HE, Fanatio, the final remaining knight serving the Star King, chose to go into deep freeze, signaling the end of the Integrity Knights…

But there were still a few details that were unclear.

"…Where were the older knights over there hidden, exactly?" Alice asked, pointing at the single-digit knights to the left of Fanatio.

Airy replied, "They were hidden in a ringed space surrounding the senate on the ninety-sixth floor, seven knights in an eternal sleep while locked in unmelting ice. But while he managed to thaw the ice eventually, Lord Kirito said that the state of their souls was unstable, and even using the Deep Freeze art that Lady Selka brought back might not be enough to reawaken them…"

"The art that Lady Ayuha and I recreated probably differs from Administrator's original petrification art in the finer details," Selka explained, gesturing with her hands. "From what I heard from Lady Fanatio, in the days of the Axiom Church, the leader of the priests, the honorable Prime Senator Chudelkin, was able to use the petrification art just with the initiation, the Deep Freeze formula, and the target. But when we chanted the same exact

formula, nothing happened. I suspect that he was using some kind of catalyst that strengthened his sacred arts."

You don't need to call him "honorable," Alice thought, but resisted the urge to interrupt.

"We searched for that catalyst," Selka continued, "but couldn't find it…which is why the art we recreated, both to freeze and unfreeze, requires over a minute to fully cast. Of course, there are bound to be a number of differences in the details, so if we used it on the knights frozen by Administrator and Chudelkin, there could be complications. That's why they gave up on bringing back the seven knights slumbering in the senate and moved them to this floor instead, I think."

"So that's the story…"

Alice gazed at the petrified knights once more and found a new mystery.

"Wait…you just said there were seven knights sleeping in the senate. That doesn't add up, does it…? Yes, if they're arranged in number order, there should be four between Fanatio and Deusolbert…"

It was very clear that there were only two knights standing between Fanatio, the second, and Deusolbert, the seventh.

This time it was Airy who answered, her long lashes downcast. "That is correct. The only knights whose locations we know are Nergius, the sixteenth, and after. The seven Ancient Knights frozen in the senate were the fourth, fifth, ninth, tenth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth. If you ignore Lady Sheyta, the twelfth, the locations of the third, sixth, eighth, and eleventh are unknown. Lord Kirito hypothesized that the life span of their souls ran out long, long ago and that they no longer exist in this world."

"……I see……"

His hypothesis was probably correct.

Alice closed her eyes, praying that the fluctlights of the four knights had found peace in the Main Visualizer, the font from which the soul sprang. She looked up and asked Airy, "What happened to Lady Sheyta? She does not seem to be here, either."

Sheyta Synthesis Twelve should have had her life frozen as well, she assumed. But to her surprise, Airy answered, "Lady Sheyta slumbers in the government building of Obsidia in the

Dark Territory—what was once Obsidia Palace."

"In Obsidia?! Why there…?"

"Because after the war, Lady Sheyta married Iskahn, the commander of the pugilists guild in the Dark Territory," said Tiese dreamily. Alice's mouth fell open in shock. The Sheyta she knew with a pugilist? What in the world happened to cause that sequence of events?

She wanted to ask every single question that came to mind about it, but it seemed inappropriate to ask what amounted to gossip in such an austere and stately place. Instead, she limited herself to a simple "Oh, I see."

That left two questions on her mind.

One was that if Tiese married Sir Renly, whom did Ronie marry?

But Alice couldn't ask that question. She took a deep breath and pushed it down, down, down, gave another scan of her former comrades turned statues, and faced Airy once more.

"Can you awaken all the knights in this room right away?"

Airy nodded firmly. "Yes. The nine aside from the seven Ancient Knights should be ready to awaken by simply reading the formula on the scroll Lord Kirito brought back from Admina. Alternately, Lady Selka could convert the formula into a potion that would also work, I believe."

"I'll do whatever you want, Alice. It might take a little time, that's all."

"Thank you, Selka." Alice beamed at her sister. Lastly, she asked Airy her final question. "But what about the life span of the soul? I believe that Lady Fanatio and Sir Deusolbert were already over a hundred years old at the time of the Otherworld War. If they continued their duties as knights for another hundred years or so, would they not have surpassed the limit of the soul already, at the point they were frozen? And on that note, you are no exception, Airy."

Words she once heard in the hundredth-floor chamber above came back to her now:

My poor Alice, let me explain something to you. Bercouli did not start worrying about such tawdry things just now. In fact, he said much the same thing about a hundred years ago. So I fixed

him.

I looked into Bercouli's memory, found the mass of troubles and anxieties, and erased the whole lot of them. And not just him…I do the same for any knight who's been around a good hundred years or so. I helped them forget all about the pain.

"…You mean Kirito did what Administrator once did as well and erased their memories and yours?"

He wouldn't have done that, she prayed. After a moment, Airy slowly but firmly shook her head.

"Lord Kirito achieved many great things as the representative of the Human Unification Council and as the Star King, but one thing that he spent as much care in creating as the dragoncraft and the terraforming of the demi-humans' lands was the memory-compression art."

"Memory…compression?"

"Yes. By compressing the storage of long-past memories that are not frequently accessed, he was able to increase the capacity of the soul and protect against degradation and collapse. If one tries to recall compressed memories, they will take some time to thaw, but the process does not cause memories to go missing, or alter anyone's personality," Airy stated flatly. Alice intuited that she, too, had undergone the memory-compression art.

"…How far does that sacred art extend the life span of the soul?"

"It depends on the amount of daily memory committed and the intensity of compression, but if you value stability, two hundred years. Whereas at maximum, Lord Kirito said it might go to around three hundred years."

"Three hundred years…"

She was stunned. In her own subjective time, Alice had been alive for only six years and a matter of months; she could not fathom a length of time like that.

But if there was that much time on hand, then it should be safe to undo Fanatio and Deusolbert's petrification and not have any issues with their fluctlights.

"And all the knights sleeping here had their souls bolstered with the memory-compression art before they went into deep freeze?" Alice asked, just to be sure.

Airy shook her head. "No. Because we have no means of asking the wishes of the seven knights who had been frozen and sealed by the pontifex, the art was not used upon them. All the other knights who had roughly a hundred years of activity have undergone memory compression."

"Ah, I see…You haven't been able to awaken those seven anyway. I understand now. Thank you."

All of Alice's concerns had been addressed. The only question now was whether to bring back those nine knights, excluding the seven Ancient Knights.

Actually, the message the Star King and Queen left for Airy said that we should discuss the question with Selka, Ronie, and Tiese. It's not a decision for me to make on my own.

"Tiese, Ronie, Selka—do you think we should bring back Fanatio and the other eight?" she asked, looking at the women in turn.

They all seemed to have made up their minds. Ronie spoke for the group.

"Yes, we do, Lady Alice."

"May I ask your reasoning?"

"We believe we will need their strength in the days ahead. As Kirito said down on the eightieth floor, it should not be possible for there to be any attack on the Integrity Pilots. Underworlders like us are fundamentally unable to fight against people or groups in superior positions."

"…That's right," said Alice. She understood what Ronie was talking about painfully well: She had once resisted the Seal of the Right Eye.

Ronie's expression was the gravest she had worn since her awakening earlier. "Presently, the Integrity Pilothood has the authority to coordinate both the Underworld Ground Force and Space Force, and only the Stellar Unification Council resides above them, according to what Laurannei said. Meaning that the only people who can plan and carry out an attack on the Pilothood are members of the Unification Council or people in an equivalent position. And if such a person should make themselves known, the Integrity Pilots might not be able to fight back against them."

"I see…But if there were knights, instead of pilots…"

"Exactly. All of the Integrity Knights swore our swords to none other than Lord Kirito and Lady Asuna. Outside of those two, there is no one we cannot possibly fight against. And I have a feeling that such a force will be necessary in the not too distant future."

9

The misty river air whipped passed my ears.

Beneath that sound was the charging footsteps of Kuro and Aga, along with the animals' breathing. My body was as low as I could make it; I had to trust in Kuro's footing.

I kept my gaze to the right, watching the far bank of the rushing river with great intensity.

About a hundred feet ahead, there was a humanoid figure leaping along the riverside. The only light was coming from the moon, so I might have lost it in the darkness if not for my Night Vision skill and the flapping white dress in the figure's arms.

We'd been chasing the monkey-type monster that snatched up Yui for more than two minutes now. I needed to get across the river somehow, but so far there hadn't been any terrain that made it possible to jump over without landing in the water. Aga might be able to swim across with Asuna on its back, but that would take at least thirty seconds, and the monkey would get far ahead in that time.

The one advantage on our side was that there was a nearly thirty-foot extreme slope on the other side of the far bank. Even a monkey couldn't climb that angle while carrying Yui, but if the slope ever leveled off, it would easily be able to turn ninety degrees and move directly away from the river until it was out of sight.

Would we make it over to the far bank first, or would the monkey escape the tight section of riverside? It was running downriver, so the width of the water was increasing over time; it looked like it was nearly twenty-five yards across at this point. It seemed like our chances were getting worse over time, and I had to work hard to stifle the onset of panic.

Friscoll said there were multiple villages and towns on the

second tier. If people lived here, there would be roads, and where roads met rivers, there were inevitably…

"…Yes!" I hissed with muted triumph.

About a hundred yards ahead was a series of four arches spanning the river: a bridge.

But perhaps it wasn't currently in use; the structure had fallen through at two points. Even still, it was clear that this was our last chance to catch up to the monkey.

"We're crossing there, Asuna!" I shouted, looking over my shoulder.

"Okay!" she cried back.

I didn't know how smart the monkey was, but it surely noticed the bridge, too. It might attempt some kind of sabotage, but at this point, we'd just have to charge right through it.

I pulled Kuro slightly to the left, then yanked it into a hard right turn. The panther whirled sideways, sending up a plume of dust, and zoomed straight toward the half-collapsed bridge with no fear.

Just in case, I glanced up to check on the monkey, thinking that it might attempt to throw a rock or something like that. Instead, I saw it *also* making a right turn and scampering away at maximum speed.

At the base of the other side of the bridge, the roughly paved road continued onward, splitting the steep hillside that blocked the monkey in and continuing to the northwest. The monkey sped down the road as quickly as it could. If it took us any extra time at all to cross the bridge, it was going to get away.

Please, Kuro! I prayed, just before Kuro leaped.

Despite carrying me in my full armor, the panther bounded right over the fifteen feet or so of collapsed bridge, landing in the center of the structure. There was another gap after that, which it also cleared, without any approach for extra speed.

Once we had crossed the crumbled bridge and reached the far bank, I looked over my shoulder to see Aga jumping over the second gap just behind us. Its distance wasn't quite adequate, which was briefly terrifying, but it used its sharp claws to clutch onto the collapsed part and scrabble up to the top, where it continued rushing after Kuro and me.

It was too early to shout in triumph, so I settled on a silent thumbs-up for now and clung low to Kuro's back again.

Up ahead, the ground rose in a very rapid ascent, except for where the road cut through it, heading into darkness. Only by squinting could I just barely make out the form of the speeding monkey.

It had pulled away a little while we crossed the bridge, but at least we were sharing the same route as the monkey now. All we had to do was close the gap—but I could see from the visual indicators that Kuro's and Aga's TP were dropping fast. If those numbers went to zero, they would lose HP next.

But the same had to be true for the monkey holding Yui, too. *Hang in there*, I told Kuro silently, and focused on our target.

The speed of the pursuers and the pursued were virtually at a deadlock. It would come down to whoever ran out of stamina first, it seemed. Asuna pushed Aga up next to us, where she could talk to me over the sound of the wind.

"Hey, Kirito, do you think that's really a monster?"

"Huh…? I mean, it sure looks like—"

And that was when a thought occurred to me. When it came to appearances, the Sixes like Zarion and Beeming looked much more like monsters than the monkey.

On top of that, its fleeing interval was way too long. The idea of monsters that might capture the smallest member in a group was not unheard of—from what they said, the gilnaris hornets had kidnapped Chett, the Patter—but this monkey had run at least two miles by now. If the situation happened to be some kind of event, this seemed like an excessive distance, and it wasn't really fair that the monkey could travel just as fast as players with fast mounts.

"If it's a player…then what is it after…?" I murmured, then thought better of it. "Actually, the motive doesn't matter. For the moment, we need to figure out a way to catch up under the assumption that it's a player."

"…Yeah," Asuna agreed, gritting her teeth.

The little path, less than six feet across, ran endlessly through a savanna-like grassland. The grass was about a foot and a half tall, so even if the large monkey dived in, it couldn't totally hide

the creature. But this terrain wasn't going to continue forever, so we had to close the gap while we still had our target in sight.

If the monkey was a player, it probably wasn't going to react to obvious lures like making loud sounds or attracting it with enticing food smells. On the other hand, it probably wouldn't have extreme attack power like the Life Harvester, either. In which case…

"Asuna, let's put our faith in these guys!" I said, rubbing Kuro's back.

After a pause, she replied, "Got it!"

"We'll jump off to the rear on zero!"

I stared, feeling out the right timing. Just as the path made a slight curve, I gave the signal.

"Two, one, zero!"

We pushed off our mounts together and landed behind them.

"Go, Kuro!"

"You can do it, Aga!"

Although we gave them no specific instructions, the two animals cried back in response and started running even faster.

Kuro and Aga had been keeping up with the monkey's speed while carrying me and Asuna on their backs. So without all that extra weight, it stood to reason, they should be able to go much faster. The monkey, meanwhile, could not speed up without letting go of Yui.

The fifty-yard gap between both sides was growing visibly smaller now. Asuna and I ran as hard as we could to keep up with our pets.

The monkey looked back over its shoulder and made a very human grimace. I could practically hear it clicking its tongue in irritation.

Then it took a very unexpected action: It faced forward, then rolled back its free hand, as though tossing something underhand. My Night Vision skill identified two lines of sparks leaving a trail in the darkness.

Suddenly, very high up in the night sky, two lights flared in red and blue. A split second later, I heard two bursts go *bang, bang!*

The lights—technically, colored flames—hung in the air without dissipating right away. They were thrown flares, then. I didn't

know what the blue and red coloring meant, but it certainly told us that the monkey's companions were somewhere within sight of the flames.

Kuro and Aga were within ten yards of the monkey now. If they could stop our target for at least five seconds, Asuna and I could catch up, kill the monkey, free Yui, and leave the area. I felt some qualms about killing the creature without finding out its reasoning, but we had to be precise about the order of priorities here.

The monkey looked back again, then came to a stop, deciding it couldn't escape. With Yui still held in its left hand, it waited without a weapon for Kuro and Aga to arrive. But through their battles, Kuro had reached level-8, while Aga was level-7. Even if the monkey was a human player, these two were not weak enough to be defeated barehanded.

Kuro and Aga started their leaping motions.

Instantly, the monkey opened its mouth wide and arched its back. Its chest puffed up like a balloon as it sucked in air. Then it clacked its jaws together, striking the four sharp canines and creating sparks.

Even I could hear the burst of flame that erupted from the monkey's mouth, red and menacing.

"Wha…?"

Kuro and Aga were instantly engulfed, even before I could wonder, *Why does a monkey have flame breath?!*

The pets' HP bars instantly lost more than a third of their total amount, and a blinking flame icon on the right end was presumably the sign of a burn status effect.

Kuro and Aga screamed and somersaulted before falling to the ground, deathly still. I wanted to help them immediately, but the flame breath was probably the monkey's best attack. It couldn't possibly utilize such a powerful technique multiple times in a row, so I had to close the gap now, before the cooldown wore off.

Kuro, Aga, hang on for a bit!

I launched over the two prone animals and drew my sword at maximum speed in midair.

Fifteen feet left to the monkey.

Because it had attacked them, the monkey finally reached

hostile status, and its spindle cursor appeared overhead. The color was the magenta-tinged ruby red unique to enemy players. Beneath its full HP bar was the name *Masaru*. That had to be a bad pun. *Saru*, as in *monkey*?

Although I appreciated his style, there was no seeing eye to eye with someone trying to kidnap my daughter.

I was within sword-skill range now, but given the possibility that Masaru, the monkey, might use Yui as a human shield, I decided to feint going into the motion for a skill as I closed in on him.

"Hah!"

Because he had Yui in his left hand, I tried a reverse diagonal to his right side. He easily jumped backward to evade, but that was exactly what I wanted.

With my sword held high, I blocked Masaru's sight line and rotated right. Asuna had been running just behind me, and grazed my back as she leaped forward. Her weapon cut through the darkness, a clear silver blaze vibrating at a high-pitched frequency.

"Whoa," Masaru grunted, his first vocalization so far.

Asuna charged with her rapier, moving so quickly that she seemed to have beaten invisible wings to do it: the Shooting Star sword skill. There was no way to avoid the fastest skill in existence when you were already airborne.

Masaru tossed Yui into the grass and crossed his arms.

The silver rapier cut deep into his limbs.

"Gaaah!" he gasped. Lisbeth's finely honed steel rapier pierced more than four inches into Masaru's arms, then blasted him backward with a deafening roar. His body was actually taller than mine if he straightened up all the way; he slammed into the ground and rolled violently.

Although his tumble was impressive, he'd lost only about a fifth of his HP. I wanted to rush over to Yui in the grass, but suppressed my impulse and said to Asuna, "Take care of Yui!" while she was on cooldown. I sprinted right for Masaru.

But I had just prepped my sword for the sword skill Vertical when a tremendous bellow filled the night sky.

"Grrrooaaaahh!!"

"…?!"

I looked up, still holding the charge on my skill, and saw three more shadows rushing down the northwest path toward us. They must have been the ones Masaru sent the flares off for.

The option of doubling back, scooping up Yui, and fleeing entered my head, but I struck it down. If these three could run as fast as Masaru, we wouldn't be able to stay ahead of them as long as Kuro and Aga had the burn Debuff. This wasn't the time for careful calculations—it was time to overwhelm the enemy with sheer, angry tenacity.

"Rrraaahhh!!" I roared back, and raced past the toppled Masaru.

My eyes were open wide, searching ferociously. The left and right shapes were small, but the one in the middle was much bigger. And it seemed to be holding some kind of large weapon in both hands.

Assuming that one was the leader, I had acquired my target. If I missed, I was almost certain to lose, but that was a risk I'd have to take.

The distance was less than sixty feet. The moonlight and my Night Vision skill brought the enemy leader into focus.

Sure enough, it was not a regular human. While it was running on two legs and wore something like leather armor on its torso, there was black-striped fur on its limbs, and its head was that of a feline predator.

A tiger. A nearly six-foot-tall tigerman.

Belatedly, I realized who the enemy was. These were players from the VRMMO in which all the player avatar choices were anthros—*Apocalyptic Date*, usually shortened to *AD*.

But the *AD* players were supposedly ahead of *ALO*, so why would they create an ambush for us and kidnap Yui?

Whatever the enemy's reasons, they didn't matter now. I wouldn't survive this peril unless I gave 100 percent of what I had to the flames of pure battle instinct.

The tigerman swung his two-handed ax high overhead.

If I attempted to dodge, I would lose my balance, and if I tried to block it now, my sword would shatter. I had to move forward… to go further beyond the enemy's expectations.

"*Groaaah!!*" the tiger roared, swinging the ax down.

"Yaaaa!!" I launched myself under the path of the ax as hard as I could.

The swing I unleashed at the same moment hit the handle of the two-handed ax. White sparks erupted, and a horrendous shock ran through every joint in my body. It was strong enough to tell me that if I had hit the ax's thick blade rather than the handle, the blow would have cut straight through the sword into me.

But my avatar's Brawn ability, along with Lisbeth's fine steel longsword, was enough to stop the two-handed ax and, after an instantaneous stalemate, push it back.

The tiger's top half was knocked upward, and my sword was deflected as well.

Waiting for this opening, the smaller beastman on the right charged. I couldn't tell what type of animal it was, but I could make out the curved dagger in its hand. If I were only waiting for myself to recover, I wouldn't have time to dodge or defend against it.

But from the moment I collided weapons with the ax, I

anticipated the angle my sword would be deflected and performed some fine-tuning of my posture. When the sword bounced back, I got it to hover over my right shoulder, enabling another sword-skill motion.

"Rrrrah!!"

The instant the sword took on a blue glow, I unleashed Vertical.

I could feel the dagger graze the right side of my armor, but rather than go for the new attacker, I slammed my sword into the tigerman, who was still in a knockback.

Wham! It felt like a good hit. The meaty blade dug deep into the enemy's leather armor, then bounced sharply upward when it reached bottom dead center.

"Gaaah!!"

The tigerman, with huge V-shaped damage on his massive body, floated many feet into the air and landed directly on his back.

I was also under a post-skill delay. The third figure rushed me from the left with a short spear. This time, I couldn't cancel out the delay with a sword skill.

However, I *could* still move my hands and wrists.

I let go of my sword hilt and brought my ten fingertips together. The moment gray light began to gather between my hands, I let my fingers part, I adjusted my angle, and I clenched both hands.

With a bone-chillingly disgusting sound, a gray mucousy blob shot forth: the decay magic spell Rotten Shot. It hit the onrushing enemy in the chest and splattered.

The enemy yelped like a dog whining. Although Rotten Shot caused no damage, its tremendous stench and taste were unbearable unless you had the strongest of wills (and stomachs).

The instant my delay was over, I flipped my falling sword up with my foot and caught it. I could sense something approaching from behind on the right, but I ignored it and jumped for all I was worth.

Ahead, the tigerman was getting to his feet. His mouth was full of viciously sharp teeth—and my sword, which I plunged into it. The sharp point penetrated his soft throat and went out the back

of his neck.

"Guhk!!" the tiger grunted as I landed on his stomach and promptly went into the motion for Rage Spike. If I managed to activate that skill, it would probably take the tiger's head off. A pale-blue light centered inside the tiger's mouth as the sword made a high-pitched whine…

"N-no, stop!" said a panicked voice behind me, prompting me to keep the sword skill in a holding state. Bright-blue light illuminated our faces.

"We surrender! We'll drop our weapons! Please don't kill him!"

Bold request from the people who kidnapped my kid, I thought, feeling my anger blaze anew. It took a deep breath to calm myself down. Masaru, the monkeyman, had abducted Yui but did not harm her. *If she'd lost even a single pixel of HP, you'd all be dead right now*, I thought darkly, and spat over my shoulder, "You two in the back, throw your weapons as far as you can into the grass on the right."

There was a prompt whooshing of air, and I spotted a dagger and short spear hurtling more than ten yards into the grass. The only weapon left was the two-handed ax in the tigerman's clutches.

"Your ax, too," I demanded. The tigerman blinked to indicate surrender and dropped the ax onto the path. I kicked it aside with my left foot and slowly pulled my sword out of his mouth.

I also took my foot off the tiger's stomach and stepped away to the left, until I was standing on the handle of the ax, at which point I turned around.

Side by side, about ten feet away, were what I took to be a raccoonman and a foxman. The fox was still squinting and grimacing, spitting to get the taste out of their mouth.

Behind them, the monkeyman sat on the ground, with Asuna's rapier and Yui's short sword pointed at him.

"Well, well…you were every bit the berserker I expected," said Otto, the tigerman leader of the team of four.

They were seated at the side of the road, tied around the ankles in a chain with Needy's rope. We'd confiscated their weapons, but that was no guarantee of safety—*AD*'s anthros had

fierce claws and teeth, too.

With my sword in hand for safety, I grunted out, "How was that fighting 'berserk'? That was totally clever, ingenious combat."

"Whatever you say," chirped Ralcas, the raccoonman, in a voice that reminded me of the Patter. *Just call yourself Rascal!* I thought, thinking of the famous cartoon raccoon, but I had to hold back. A character name was part of the user's identity, so he probably had his own reasons, which were none of my business.

"Normally in a three-on-one fight, you'd either run away or at least stop. You've gotta be crazy to start running even faster into combat," Ralcas continued.

Next to him, Azuki, the fox, was swishing their tongue around in their mouth unpleasantly. "Euuugh…This gross taste just won't go away…Ewww, what kind of magic *was* that…?"

Based on the voice, Azuki seemed to be the sole female player of the group. I went into my inventory and took out a pottery jar. While the fox accepted it, she seemed skeptical of my generosity.

"It's just water," I said, and turned to Masaru, the monkeyman, who was farther on the right. "So…is anyone going to tell me why you were trying to kidnap her?"

Masaru glanced behind me to my left, where Asuna stood next to Kuro and Aga, holding Yui in her arms. The pets' burns had been treated by a salve she made with her Pharmaceutical skill, and some potions fully recovered their HP, but they looked furious enough to pounce on these four at any moment.

"Let's see, where to begin…?" murmured Masaru, who had a very mellifluous and intelligent-sounding voice for someone whose name was the dumbest-possible monkey pun. "We reached the second tier in the morning two days ago, half a day after *Asuka*. But they're in a freezing region of ice and snow, where they have to deal with cold, while we're in a forest zone with ample water, food, and natural resources, so we should have been able to catch up quickly. We sent an advance team of five parties, totaling forty in all, to clear the first six or so miles, and found a clearing with a fresh spring of water, so we decided to use that as a resupply base."

"Hold on. If there are forty in your scouting party, how many people in the *AD* faction have actually reached the second tier?" I

interrupted.

Masaru glanced at Otto to his left before replying. "I'll answer your question, but I have no evidence to back it up."

"We'll decide whether it's true or not."

"…About two hundred. Of course, not all of them are diving at the exact same time."

Two hundred?! I nearly screamed.

From the *ALO* faction, only thirteen people had made it to the second tier so far, including the three of us here. I hoped the two hundred number was just a bluff, but it was impossible to read the expression on Masaru's monkey face.

I was about to move on when Yui spoke up. "I do not think he is lying."

How can you tell? I might have asked, but I knew the answer already. She had analyzed Masaru's tone of voice and emotional register. I couldn't allow her to mention any of that in front of these four, though.

"I see. In that case, I'll trust you on it."

"Also, although it is not foolproof, there is a way to test the hypothesis."

"Oh?" I asked, surprised. "H-how?"

"If we have Masaru open his menu, we can check the number of people registered in his friends list."

"Ah…yes, that makes sense…," I murmured, right as Masaru muttered, "That was an option…?"

Messaging friends was one of the few privileges of convenience that the hardcore realist presentation of *Unital Ring* afforded to its players. Since you never knew who you might need to reach, there was a good chance he was registered to everyone he knew.

Without waiting for an order from me, Masaru elected to open his menu and hit the COMMUNICATIONS icon. Looking over his shoulder, I saw the number *218* in the upper right portion of his friends list.

"…It checks out."

"Glad to hear it," Masaru said, closing his menu. "So in order to build a base in the clearing in the forest, we started cutting down trees. There wasn't enough empty space there, and there were tons of valuable-looking conifers right around the clearing. And

since we have tons of really strong therians like Otto over there, we quickly—"

"What's a therian?"

"Oh, it's short for *therianthrope*. It's what all the animalpeople in *AD* are called."

"Ahhh, I see. Carry on."

"…So we cut down five or six of those conifers, and we were about to start lumbering the wood to use—when all of a sudden, about twenty NPCs pop out of the woods and start firing arrows at us. *Man*, they hurt bad…"

"No exaggeration, they hit us a hundred percent of the time," Otto added, his large frame shivering. "It's a miracle nobody died—thanks to Casper's quick order to retreat."

That was another new name to keep track of, but if I stopped them for notes at every opportunity, they'd never finish their story. I filed it away to remember later.

"So we ran away at the time, but the NPCs just kept chasing us. We ended up having to retreat, like, four miles. They only stopped pursuing once we left the forest, so we camped there, then set up a team of eight of our best stealth therians to make a recon party. Azuki and I were part of that," Masaru continued, throwing a glance to Azuki, who had finally cleared out the aftertaste of Rotten Shot by drinking enough water.

She noticed his signal and picked up the story. "It was Masaru and me and a weasel, a mongoose, an ocelot—all people who are good at sneaking. Everyone had the Swiftness ability tree, with skills like Hiding and Acrobat, so we assumed that no enemy was going to spot us, no matter who they were. In fact, we got back to the original clearing without any trouble, and from there we went hardcore ninja-mode and searched real carefully for the enemy base. But…"

Her pointed snout drooped with disappointment. Masaru took over again, frustration and fear thick in his voice.

"…We had moved about three hundred yards farther into the forest. Once again, the same NPCs totally surrounded us, without any of us knowing. They pulled their bows on us and said something, but nobody knew what it was…I was so sure that we were dead, and then Mageshima, the mongoose, used Smoke

Breath…”

“Wh-what’s Smoke Breath?” I asked, unable to help myself this time.

Masaru shrugged. “Just an inherited skill that deploys a smoke screen. Same thing as the Flame Breath I used earlier.”

“Ohhh…”

An inherited skill was the one thing you could bring over from the game your character was forcibly converted from.

Now that he mentioned it, the monkeyman *had* blown fire breath at Kuro and Aga. I thought it didn’t make sense that a monkey could blow fire, but if the attack had originally come from *Apocalyptic Date*, that would explain it. Perhaps Otto, Ralcas, and Azuki could employ some kind of breath, too, but finding that out would have to wait until later as well.

“…We made a plan ahead of time that if Mageshima breathed smoke, we would all run immediately, so I ran like my life depended on it. Arrows were shooting left and right, so I was zigzagging for all I was worth, finally got free of them, and went back to the fallout spot we agreed on…and only five of the eight made it back.”

“…Did the other three die?”

“Nope. Mageshima, Katoko, and Schwein got captured by the enemy.”

“……”

Although they were our enemies at the moment, I couldn’t help but feel sympathy. Capturing and imprisoning players in a VRMMO was about the most devastating thing imaginable, especially in *Unital Ring*, where dying was the end of the experience for good.

“I’m sorry to hear that…but what does any of that have to do with kidnapping the girl?” I asked, glancing at Yui.

Masaru sighed deeply. “We can’t just give up on them. But we can’t fight the guys in the forest, even with all two hundred of us. The only thing we can do is barter…But as I’m sure you guys know, if you haven’t learned the right language skill, you can’t even tell what the NPCs are saying. The only way to earn the skill is by patiently speaking with those NPCs, but these guys attack as soon as they see us. We set up a hostile situation with our first

interaction, and now our bartering method's been cut off at the knees."

"Yeah, but—!" Ralcas protested indignantly. "We didn't even have a chance to be hostile to them! They just started shooting arrows for doing nothing more than building our base in peace! I mean, I know most of the NPCs here are hostile, but what they did just ain't fair!"

"If that's what you wanna argue, nothing in *UR* is fair," Otto pointed out. I very nearly chimed in with, *No kidding*, and ended up making a funny grimace. Their story was very interesting, and I was getting invested; I had to remind myself that they were our enemies.

"…I've got my own ideas about why they attacked us first…but we can discuss that later," Masaru said calmly, and glanced briefly at Yui. "It's impossible to rescue them with force. Peaceful negotiation is also impossible…so the only option left is some kind of backdoor cheat, we decided. For the past two days, we've been gathering intel like crazy. As part of that process, some of our members with dormant side accounts converted their characters to a few of the big games…and someone who snuck into the starting area of *ALO* came back with something really interesting. They said that the famous Black Swordsman had built a huge base just before the entrance to the second tier and had two different kinds of NPCs living there. It's really hard to make friendly relations with NPCs as it is, but to have two kinds of NPCs moving in with you? That's remarkable. We sent several more people into the Stiss Ruins, and one of them was lucky enough to hitch a ride with a caravan that was going to Kirito's town…Ruis na Ríg."

Friscoll had been saying something about new players showing up at the Stiss Ruins in starter gear and asking lots of questions. He had guessed that they actually belonged to *Asuka* or *AD*, and wouldn't you know it? He was right.

"When they got to Ruis na Ríg and started asking around there, they found out that Kirito was friends with a real intriguing player. Someone who looked like a little girl but could communicate freely with all NPCs, and maybe *she* was the one who convinced the NPCs to come to Ruis na Ríg…If that were

even possible, there could only be one reason why."

I broke out in a cold sweat, expecting him to say that she was an AI, not a human.

But the reason he looked at Yui was for something I did not expect.

"She inherited some kind of language-type skill, didn't she? Something that allows her to speak with all species…If that skill works on the *UR* NPCs, too, then maybe she can communicate with the people who took our folks."

Masaru tore his gaze away from her and looked at me again.

"Now do you understand why we were trying to abduct her?"

"……"

Yes, I do—not that I forgive you for even the tiniest ounce of your sin, I would have said, if Yui hadn't spoken up first.

"Then why didn't you seek us out to hire us on peaceful terms?" she asked.

Masaru looked stunned. Otto held up his hands accusingly.

"If we had asked, would you have actually accepted?"

"Of course!" Yui insisted boldly, albeit from the safety of Asuna's arms. Pride swelled in my chest.

But that didn't mean I approved of it, as her guardian. If these NPCs from the western forest were powerful enough to easily subdue forty of the best of these powerful *Apocalyptic Date* warriors, the thought of putting Yui in front of their arrows made a chill run down my back.

"…Don't go thinking you can actually hire her for the mission, just because she's saying this now," I growled at Masaru and his shocked companions. Then it occurred to me to ask a question I should have asked a while ago. "Besides, what are these NPCs like anyway?"

"Oh, I didn't mention? They're elves…and their skin is brown, so I guess they'd be dark elves."

"Dark…elves," I murmured, looking upward skeptically.

He added, "Like I said earlier, we couldn't understand a word, but there was one thing we could make out…their title or their nation or something like that. I think it was…Lusula? Ryusula? Something like that."

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"……It really is a marvel."

Alice couldn't help but be impressed. Her sister turned around, clutching the freshly made thawing solution to her chest, and beamed.

"You can even make it yourself, as long as you remember the steps. Your sacred arts authority is higher than mine."

Indeed, Alice's System Call authority level was just slightly higher than Selka's at the moment, but that was only because she had defeated the Abyssal Horror; it wasn't the product of long, tedious practice.

Of course, when she was a lower knight, she had studied sacred arts for all she was worth, and she was fairly confident in her control of the elements, but she could tell that she was nowhere near ready to match Selka's delicate but powerful techniques. After all, her sister had gone from an apprentice nun to the commander of the sacred artificers brigade.

On top of that, the process of liquefying the petrification-thawing art was so difficult that it beggared the imagination.

You had to lay out holy flowers, brimming with plentiful sacred power, on the worktable, then generate light, dark, water, and crystal elements simultaneously. After a complex process to preserve the elements separately, you would recite just a single verse of the vast thawing art formula. Once the effect of the art was transferred to the elements, they would liquefy and flow into an empty crystal container before you moved on to the next verse.

This process was just an extension of the life-restoring potion-making process that apprentices learned, but the scale absolutely dwarfed that neophyte's lesson. On top of that, maintaining the elements probably involved the use of Incarnation.

Seeing her little tomboy sister grown into a master of a craft impressed upon Alice the weight of time that had passed during the maximum-acceleration phase. But she was happy to know that this process utilized the phrase for the Hollow Sphere Shape, which Alice had long ago taught her.

Even two centuries later, the Underworld's past and present were connected, in ways she could tangibly feel. Alice reached out and took the fifth vial of thawing solution from Selka.

Two hours had passed since she bade farewell to the sleeping knights on the ninety-ninth floor and returned to the ninety-fifth floor.

They had decided to awaken the knights, but to do nine at once required quite a lot of preparation first. They needed not just the requisite number of antidotes, but also an ample supply of food and drink, as well as private chambers for each knight.

Airy went about preparing the food, while Ronie and Tiese agreed to clean out some rooms for them. Alice volunteered to be Selka's assistant, but all she could do was place the empty vials and reagents on the worktable and put the finished solutions in a wooden box. The rest of the time, she just watched Selka work her magic.

Preparing all the tools and items took an hour, so they only started the work at ten o'clock at night. In the hour that followed, they had finished five vials of solution, but including a safety backup, they needed ten in total, so even if they kept working nonstop, it would be after midnight when they finished.

"Selka, let's take a little break," Alice suggested while her sister was setting out a fresh row of holy flowers on the table.

For her part, Selka had only just awakened from a 140-year sleep six hours ago. She had bathed and eaten, but she really wasn't back to full recovery yet.

She looked up and smiled. "I'm fine, Sister." But no sooner had she said the words than her upper half visibly wobbled.

"You see?"

Alice hurried to support her little sister, and she escorted her over to a nearby bench to sit down. She filled a cup with water and used heat elements to heat it to lukewarm before offering it

to Selka, who took it carefully and slowly drank bit by bit.

"Phew…It's really impressive how quickly you can generate those elements without a spoken command, Alice."

"It's not really something to be proud of…It's a technique you only learn to use in battle."

"But your battle saved the Underworld," Selka pointed out, and waved to the empty spot next to her. When Alice sat down there, Selka gave her a gentle hug.

Alice returned the gesture, putting her arms around her sister's back and burying her face in that silky hair. A familiar, sweet scent permeated her existence.

This Alice did not have childhood memories. The time she had spent with Selka was only the five months she had spent in the woods outside of Rulid while on the run from Central Cathedral. Even still, somewhere in the lightcube that stored her soul, it felt like there were younger memories still hiding out of sight.

"…Say, Selka," Alice managed to whisper, pushing through heavy hesitation. "When things have settled down…would you want to return to Rulid?"

Two centuries had passed since Alice had left Rulid to take part in the defensive Battle of the Eastern Gate. Their father, Gasfut Zuberg, and their mother, Sadina, had long ago returned to the heavens. In fact…since neither Alice nor Selka had gone back to the village, it was quite possible that the Zuberg line, which served as the village's elders, had simply vanished.

But Selka nodded anyway. "That's a good idea, Alice. The last time I was in the village was back in 438 HE, after all…"

"Did you go back to Rulid often?"

"No, just once every few years. In the year 436, Father—"

She was interrupted in the middle of that sentence by a tremendous vibration that shook the entire length of the cathedral.

Zr-drrmm!!

"…?!"

"Wh-what was that?!"

They stood up as one. There was another vibration. Then another.

Alice cast around for more information. Through the trees

lining the western side of the floor, she could see sparks falling like rain. It seemed that something had struck a wall on a higher floor and exploded.

She ran to the west, through the planters, and stood right at the edge of the floor. Using one of the pillars to support herself, she leaned over the edge so that she could look up. About sixty feet above, somewhere around the ninety-eighth or ninety-ninth floor, little remnant fires were clinging to the wall of the cathedral. The wall itself seemed to be fine, but because of the dark, it was hard to see if there was finer damage to the exterior.

What could have exploded?

"Alice, look!" cried Selka, pointing to the sky to the west.

As soon as she looked that direction, Alice sucked in a sharp breath.

Near the horizon was a golden curve: the companion star Admina, which had once been known as Lunaria.

And just above it, high in the night sky, were three dark shapes floating at equal intervals from one another.

It was difficult to gauge the distance, but each one seemed like it measured well over thirty mels across. They had rounded, bulging bodies and vast wings that stretched out on either side, just like…

"…Dragoncraft!!" Selka hissed.

There could be no doubt. These were extra-large dragoncraft outfitted in black armor. When Kirito had summoned her to Admina, Alice had used her Perfect Weapon Control art to destroy an Avus—which was exactly what these looked like.

The two women watched, stunned, as orange lights flashed beneath the wings of the three craft.

The lights separated from the dragoncraft, soaring straight ahead and emitting a ghastly wail like the screams of monsters, before sticking into the top of the cathedral. There were three quick, fierce explosions that shuddered the white tower.

"Ah…!"

Selka stumbled, and Alice acted on instinct to grab her sister close and pull her back from the edge.

She needed to act immediately, but her mind was blank. She didn't know what to do.

The three dragoncraft in the night sky were firing what the real world called missiles at Central Cathedral. Even as she was watching it unfold before her eyes, her mind seemed to want to resist accepting it as truth.

Central Cathedral was an impregnable holy site, the throne of the God who every person in the human realm feared and revered. Apparently, the old habits from her days of serving the pontifex were dying hard. But that attitude should still be the same in the common people, since they still worshipped Stacia. Who could possibly plot such a dastardly, heretical crime as attempting to destroy the cathedral itself?

She was still frozen in place when she heard Airy's voice right in her ear. "Lady Alice, Lady Selka, this way."

Guided by the voice, Alice took Selka's hand and pulled her through the trees and into the center of the floor.

Airy was still wearing a white triangular hat from her cooking process. She raised a hand high and announced, "System Call! Activate emergency mode!"

Alice had never heard that phrase before. Suddenly, the floor around Airy's feet glowed purple. A number of massive windows appeared, surrounding Airy.

Her slender fingers danced across the control window closest

to her. Once again, the cathedral shuddered, but this time it was not because of an explosion.

"Oh! Alice!" Selka cried. Alice looked back to the west.

With a heavy rumbling, marble slabs jutted from the ceiling and floor, closing off the opening to the outdoors. In just a matter of seconds, the slabs met seamlessly in the middle, so there was no longer a way to see the outside.

Right after that came another series of explosions. But the shaking of the tower was noticeably less than the first and second time.

"…I have sealed all the windows and openings and reinforced the weaker walls. We should be able to withstand for much longer now," Airy announced calmly.

Alice didn't even know what to ask first. Had this mechanism existed in the cathedral from the start? Where had the trio of large black dragoncraft come from? Why, and on whose orders, were they attacking Central Cathedral?

Actually, the answer to the second question was obvious.

"Did they come from Admina?" she asked when she was calm enough to speak.

"I believe so," Airy confirmed. "Even for a military craft, it would take five hours from Admina to Cardina, so they likely took flight from a different base on Admina just after Lord Kirito and Lord Eolyne quelled that unidentified base."

"The conquering of their base must have come as a total surprise. That is an unbelievably quick turnaround for a full-scale retaliatory action," Selka murmured, just as clanging footsteps on the stairs announced the arrival of Ronie and Tiese. They had removed their armor and robes and were wearing the much more versatile and light pilot's uniform.

"What was all that shaking about?! I heard something like explosions…," Tiese was saying, but she stopped in shock when she saw Airy surrounded by all those windows. Ronie (still carrying Natsu) was likewise open-mouthed.

"Lady Tiese, Lady Ronie, please have a look at this," Airy directed. She tapped on the control panel, bringing up a new window a bit farther away. It was an entire mel tall and wide, and it showed the three craft floating in the night sky with stunningly

crisp detail.

Right as they looked at the image, the craft fired their missiles again. Three orange lights shot forward, splitting the darkness, and vanished off the side of the window.

A roar. Vibration.

Alice held on to the storage box carefully with both hands, to ensure the previous thawing solutions didn't fall onto the floor and shatter. "Airy, the materials making up the cathedral's structure are still system-level indestructible, right?" she asked, using a real-world term for VRMMOs.

Thankfully, Airy seemed to understand what she meant. "Yes, the pontifex designated the walls to have the maximum priority and self-repairing level, and those values are still active. But…look here."

She pointed out another window that featured bar graphs similar to HP bars in *ALO* and *Unital Ring*, but arranged in a cross shape. The one on the left was glowing red.

"This is a directional Incarnameter. It is picking up a strong value on the west face, where we were attacked. I believe the dragoncraft are not shooting simple heat-element projectiles, but tactical Incarnate weapons."

"Incarnate…weapons," Alice repeated. Three days earlier, she had heard the same term being spoken by the guardsmen who took Kirito away from the Arabel mansion. Although the workings were a mystery to her, she could imagine that it referred to weapons that made some use of Incarnation.

"That's not good," Tiese murmured pensively, staring up at the window. "It depends on the type and strength of Incarnation the projectiles are emitting, but it we take too many of them, the accumulation of the overwriting effect could cause the outer walls to lose their resistance to the explosions…"

Overwriting effect was a new term to Alice, but like *Incarnate weapons*, she could imagine what it signified.

Incarnation was ultimately a concept emitted by the soul: the use of the imagination to interfere with the laws of the world and make the impossible possible. You could move objects without using your hands with Incarnate Arms, cut through a target with invisible slashes using Incarnate Sword, generate elements

without saying a word, and create more than ten simultaneous elements on your fingers, all by utilizing Incarnation.

In other words, Incarnation was the ability to overwrite the system of the world. That also applied to the basic laws of the cathedral's vast priority and regenerative abilities. So if an adequately powerful Incarnation were used, it was still possible to destroy the building.

As if to back up her hypothesis, Airy said, "The life of the west-facing wall of the ninety-ninth floor is eleven percent consumed. Self-repair is engaged, but due to a lack of the cathedral's sacred-power intake, it will not match the rate of consumption."

"About ten percent after four attacks…meaning it can take another thirty-six hits?" Alice suggested, doing some quick calculation.

Airy shook her head. "I'm afraid that the more the wall is damaged, the stronger the Incarnate weapons' overwriting effect becomes. I would hazard a guess that another ten attacks or so will destroy the wall."

The fifth round of explosions happened before the words had finished leaving her mouth. While the situation was dire, there was one other question on Alice's mind.

It must have been on Selka's mind, too, because she looked up at the ceiling and asked, "Is it just a coincidence that they're attacking the ninety-ninth floor…?"

"No. I believe the attackers' target is the Integrity Knighthood held there."

Despite the calmness of her voice, Alice didn't miss the slight clenching of Airy's cheeks near her mouth.

That reaction was understandable. Almost no one in existence knew that the ninety-ninth floor of Central Cathedral was where the Integrity Knights of yore now slumbered.

But Airy's emotional display went no further than that. She performed more commands at the control panel.

Yet another window opened. This one showed the whole of Centoria that was visible from the south. In the middle of the city was the towering white spire, glowing red right near the tip on its west face. The burning was not on the wall itself, but the explosive remnants stuck to the surface. From the ground,

however, it surely looked as though the cathedral itself was on fire.

It was after eleven o'clock at night, but there were powerful searchlights all over the city scouring the night sky, and mechamobiles with rotating red lights drove in the streets. Of course, the electroblades used by the North Centoria Imperial Guard would not bring down dragoncraft hovering at a height of over five hundred mels.

On that note, there should be a space force base in North Centoria. Their job was to protect from the sky—what were they doing? As if in response, the image on the window zoomed in on a point in the background.

The black surface stretching beyond the edges of North Centoria was Lake Norkia. Even beyond that, in the region the Norlangarth imperial family had once enjoyed as its private reserves two hundred years ago, a number of lights were wavering. The image got closer and closer to the base.

"Oh…!" Ronie gasped the moment it stopped zooming in.

They weren't lights—they were fires. Several places on the series of long buildings there were furiously aflame. And the huge, four-sided spire behind them was…

"The space force base…," murmured Alice.

Tiese snapped upright. "Oh no…! Stica and Laurannei are at the base! Airy, can you get the picture any closer?!"

"I'm very sorry, Lady Tiese," Airy apologized. "The art this remote vision board employs can only view from the airspace over Centoria itself. I will try adjusting the brightness."

She performed some quick actions, and the scenery in the window began to get lighter bit by bit. Eventually, a dark, ominous shape became visible directly over the base. It was clearly the same kind of large dragoncraft as the three attacking Central Cathedral.

Although it was only hovering, there were still smaller explosions happening here and there all over the base. Even at this moment, enemy soldiers must have been battling against the space force guards and pilots. And knowing Stica and Laurannei, Alice knew they almost certainly were not hiding in a safe, remote location.

The three craft in a separate window fired their sixth round of missiles. Another series of thunderous explosions sent Natsu trembling in Ronie's arms.

Another eight blasts until the wall of the ninety-ninth floor was destroyed. They didn't have time to carry Fanatio and the others downstairs in stone form.

"…I will put a stop to the attacks on the cathedral," Alice announced, grabbing the Osmanthus Blade resting on her left hip.

She knew from experience on Admina that she could bring down one of those large black dragoncraft with her weapon's Perfect Control art. But the three were currently hovering over West Centoria. If they crashed there, who could say how much damage it would cause to the populace?

If she could deliver the right amount of noncatastrophic damage, they might withdraw, but from the cathedral here, there was no way for her attacks to reach craft nearly a kilor away. Somehow, she had to get within firing range of her Perfect Control art.

The X'rphan Mk. 13 was right before her eyes, but it was badly damaged and couldn't fly, not to mention the fact that Alice could not pilot it. Her dragon, Amayori, with whom she'd flown so much, was still only an egg.

Alice bit her lip and cast about desperately for something she could use. Her attention was drawn to one part of the floor.

She turned to say something to Airy.

But just at that moment, the large dragoncraft in the middle of the window did something entirely different.

The craft in the center shone white. Alice tensed, preparing for a new kind of attack, but the light extended upward instead.

Eventually, a massive figure appeared in the midst of the light.

It was translucent, not a physical figure. Through some unknown means, it appeared to be casting an image in three dimensions. Although the figure appeared vague at first, it quickly grew in detail, until it took the clear form of a man.

He wore a high-collared coat with two rows of buttons. There were epaulets with decorative frills on his shoulders and a number of military decorations on his left breast. His brows and nose cut sharp lines on his face, and the look in his eyes was chillingly

cold, even in an empty image. Based on his appearance alone, he seemed to be around forty years old.

His mouth, adorned with a fine mustache, emitted a clear, proud voice.

"People of Centoria and all of the four empires. I am Emperor Agumar Wesdarath VI, the rightful ruler of the entire human realm."

His voice had to be amplified using some art or device. It penetrated the exterior wall of the cathedral and seemed to land directly in Alice's ears.

Agumar Wesdarath. She remembered that name.

When Alice had been responsible for Centoria as an Integrity Knight, the emperor of the western empire was Aldares Wesdarath V. And his father, if she recalled correctly, was Agumar Wesdarath V.

In the four imperial families that had once controlled the lands of the human realm, the names of the first emperors and the founders—the first emperors' fathers—were sainted, and the first son of each subsequent generation of princes was always given one of the two names. The name of Agumar VI was indeed in-line with convention, but that did not mean, of course, that he was actually the descendant of the real Wesdarath line.

As Alice, Selka, Ronie, Tiese, and Airy watched in horrified silence, the man seemed to look at them directly through the image window, though it was surely a coincidence, and delivered a stately proclamation.

"You are in illegal occupation of the sealed floors of Central Cathedral. I believe you understand the offensive power of my dragoncraft. I will give you a grace period of ten minutes. Use that time to undo all defensive barriers and demonstrate your obedience. Otherwise, I will destroy the sealed floors without a trace."

11

To get back to the riverside in the south and explain what had happened to our companions took a whole thirty minutes.

Once I finally finished my story, Klein, gesturing wildly, shouted, "Um, doesn't that seem a little overly generous to you?!"

Others made their displeasure known, too.

"Kirito, they kidnapped Yui. No matter what their situation is, you can't form a relationship of trust after an event like that!" Lisbeth added, expressing her outrage.

"And what merit is there for helping the *AD* faction out in this? The only thing they offered was a nonaggression agreement. And even that is just lip service in the end," Sinon pointed out.

Their negative opinions were all valid. What Masaru's group was asking for was to take Yui into the wooded region in the west and have her act as an interpreter between them and the NPCs there. The NPCs were already totally hostile, so they might attack outright, and since their arrows struck the target 100 percent of the time, an encounter could easily be fatal.

And the only reward for braving such dangers was a temporary truce between *AD* and *ALO*, in which neither side would attack the other while on the second tier. Otto did say, "That's all I can tell you right now, but I'll discuss with Casper to see if we can give you a more material payment," but based on his tone of voice, I wasn't counting on anything extra.

When I heard the offer, I had thought, *Give us a bit more…or a lot more!* Considering the gap in strength, a truce would benefit the *ALO* side more, but their route and our route through the second tier were dozens of miles apart. We shouldn't be converging until the very end of the tier anyway, so the impact of a truce seemed slight.

Considering the sequence of events, we could be forgiven for

spurning Masaru's offer and slaughtering them all on the spot. Still, I told them we would confer with our teammates and released them—and not because they had traveled dozens of miles to reach us. It was because of the name of the NPCs troubling them and the breathtaking shock it inflicted on us.

I shared a look with Asuna, who was still holding Yui, then turned to speak to the group.

"I know you're not satisfied with this, and I agree that it would be better to ignore *AD*'s troubles and focus on our own path ahead. But…I want to find out more about the NPCs who made contact with the *AD* faction…for reasons that are personal to me and Asuna."

"To…the NPCs?" Silica asked, confused. Holgar and Leafa looked suspicious as well.

"Yeah," I said. "In *SAO*, Asuna and I were part of a really long series of quests called the Elf War Campaign. You had to pick either the forest elves or the dark elves, and collect these special items. The forest elves' nation was called Kales'Oh. And the dark elves' was Lyusula."

It was all I could do to stem the tide of memories coming back as I told the story.

"Apparently, the NPCs who attacked the *AD* folks were dark elves calling themselves Lyusula. That simply can't be a coincidence. If *Unital Ring* is connected to the Aincrad of *SAO*, I want to know why and how. I'll do anything to find out."

The others were silent for a while after I finished. Eventually, Argo wrapped up interpreting my speech to Zarion and Ceecee, and hopped to her feet atop the rock she was using as a chair.

"Kiri-boy, is that pure curiosity yer speakin' from? Or are you thinkin' that finding out why the NPCs' proper name is copy-pasted might contribute to conquerin' *Unital Ring*?"

She leveled an all-seeing gaze at me.

And she really *did* see all, I presumed. Argo was the only person among the *SAO* survivors who had been with Asuna and me all the way from the lowest levels of Aincrad. She'd taken part in our Elf War Campaign and, in the process, had met…*her*.

So she should have known the other reason that Asuna and I couldn't just ignore the name Lyusula.

Argo said not a word about that, however; she simply gave us a look that asked how serious we were. I stared her right back in the eyes.

"I think it *will* contribute. We know from experience that information gained from NPCs is crucial in this world. From what I hear, we wouldn't have beaten the gilnaris hornets without intel from the Patter. It's very likely that the same thing will happen on the second tier."

"Yeah, but we're aiming for the third tier along the southern route, right?" pointed out Friscoll. "There are probably NPCs along our way, too, so why wouldn't we just get along with them, instead?"

"I agree," Holgar chimed in. "Honestly, it would be better for us overall if the dark elves stay hostile to *AD*."

"Yeah, that's true. But…the dark elves and forest elves from *SAO* were very highly civilized compared to the rest of the NPCs. If the dark elves in this world are based on those from the *SAO* setting, they might not just have crucial information, but top-level crafting and magic skills. If we could learn those from them, it could create a huge boost to our progress," I said. All of it was true, but it was not the entire truth.

The reason I didn't bring up the name of Kizmel, royal knight of Lyusula, was because it would make things too complicated and because I was afraid of giving a concrete definition to the faint, misty hope that Asuna and I were currently feeling. It would be too painful to experience the true sadness of loss that we had already accepted three and a half years ago…

"Hrrrm. Well, it's a tough decision," grumbled Holgar, folding his arms to think. Friscoll did the same thing.

"Indeed, indeed. The western forest route is tough going but an opportunity to gain strong weapons and magic, while the southern grassland route is easier but with fewer rewards, it would seem. If that's the case, I guess the ideal outcome would be to get the stuff we want from the elves in the west, then use them to travel through the southern grassland…"

"But will it really work that well?" Zarion said in English, which was easy enough to understand. The rest of the group murmured deep in their throats.

I gave the clock a glance and clapped my hands. "Listen, I'm sorry for making things complicated. I told the *AD* folks that I'd respond to them by noon tomorrow, so let's talk it over with the others before we decide. For tonight, though, I'd like to get a bit farther. Should we make a base over there first?"

I pointed at a small set of ruins on the other side of the river. It was where Masaru had lain in wait for hours to ambush Yui, but because of that, we knew it wasn't a risk for dangerous monsters.

With Aga's help, we crossed one by one, with me going first this time, and inspected the ruins. There were three buildings of varying sizes, which seemed to me like a watchtower for the bridge and a station for soldiers, but the majority of the roof and walls had crumbled inward, so they didn't look like much of anything anymore.

Even still, we found rusted longswords and short swords, along with some broken armor and faded coins, so we collected them all. Next, we went to the biggest building—which bore a resemblance to our log cabin—and used the logs and boards on hand to repair the walls and fashion it into a simple shelter.

With our safety secured, Holgar suggested another bathroom break, which I made use of this time. I sat down in a location out of the way, opened my menu, and hit the LOG OUT button.

After the system voice said, "Disconnecting from *Unital Ring*," a rainbow circle rose around my lower half. Once it had enveloped my avatar, I saw nothing but a flowing spectrum of color.

The sensation was like falling—or maybe rising. I was cut off from the senses of my avatar, and the slightly stronger weight of real gravity took over.

"…Whew…"

I sat upright and pulled the AmuSphere off my head.

I'd forgotten to turn on a night-light before the dive, so the room was completely dark. I was looking for the remote to the lights when I noticed that the notifications blinker on my phone on the side table was active.

I picked it up and turned on the screen; there was one notification. Someone had called my phone just a minute ago. It was from…Alice.

So she was back from the Underworld. I started to call her

back, but my phone started vibrating first. Alice was calling again.

I slid the ANSWER button over and put the phone to my ear.

"Hey, Alice, did you get some good time in with Sel—?"

She cut me off, her voice panicked. *"Kirito, come to Rath right away!"*

"Huh…? Wh-what's the matter?"

"Something very bad is happening in the Underworld! I'm going right back in, but we need you and Asuna!"

I wanted to ask her what it was but held my question back. Her voice sounded just as strained as it had been when we fought Administrator together, making it very clear that every minute and every second was of the essence right now.

"Got it. Once I contact Asuna, I'll dive into the Underworld as soon as I possibly can," I told her.

As quickly as humanly possible, she replied, "*Please do. I'll find a way to protect the cathedral until then*," and hung up.

The phrase *protect the cathedral* sounded very ominous to me, but I tried not to think too hard about it, and put the AmuSphere on again. Once back in *Unital Ring*, I told Asuna and Yui about the message from Alice, since they were right there. Then I spoke up, cutting through the conversations happening around the room.

"Sorry, everyone. Asuna and I have urgent business. I'm sorry to do this when things were about to get serious, but can two other people or so watch our avatars with Yui?"

"Really, Kiri? 'Urgent business' at this time of night?" Klein snarked back. But he quickly sensed that the situation was no joking matter and added, "All right…I'll watch you guys."

"Thanks, appreciate it!"

I bowed to show my deep appreciation to the group, then logged out along with Asuna.

Before my sense of balance had even returned, I was ripping off my AmuSphere and getting to my feet. It had taken two whole minutes to explain the situation to Asuna and the others.

Even if I called a taxi right this instant, it would still take an entire hour to get from Kawagoe in Saitama to Rath's Roppongi office in Minato Ward, Tokyo.

But I didn't even look at my phone. Instead, I rushed over to two large cardboard boxes stacked in a corner of the room.

12

Upon her return after two minutes of being logged out, Alice opened her eyes and asked Selka, "How much more time do we have?!"

"Seven minutes, Alice. Did you reach Kirito?!"

"Yes, he said he'd come…as soon as he could…but…"

She had to tell them the harsh reality of the situation, because Selka, Tiese, and Ronie looked all too relieved at the news.

"…Kirito's home in the real world is over thirty kilors away from the facility where he travels to the Underworld. I believe it will take an hour or longer for him to arrive."

"Kirito's home…," Ronie murmured, her eyes briefly vacant before snapping back into focus. "An hour? But we can't always rely on him to get us out of trouble every single time."

"That's right. Now is the time to demonstrate our pride as knights and articians," Tiese and Selka added.

In the window screen, the three large dragoncraft continued to point their prows at the cathedral. The solid image of the man calling himself Agumar Wesdarath VI had vanished, but he was sure to appear again to deliver his final warning when their grace period was almost over.

"Six minutes left," Selka announced. Alice took a deep breath and exhaled.

The hour until Kirito arrived would be an eternity, given the situation. But until then, the five of them would have to protect the cathedral—specifically, the sleeping knights on the ninety-ninth floor.

She squeezed the sheath holding her sword. Tiese placed a hand on the pommel of the thin longsword that hung from the left hip of her knight's uniform and announced, "We will fight, too, Lady Alice!"

“Thank you, Tiese. But only two can ride on that,” she replied, glancing at Airy, who was busy performing setup in the corner. Before Alice logged out, the handrail and step had been removed, but now they were attached again, so Airy was almost done.

“But…,” Tiese protested. Alice laid a hand on her shoulder.

“You and Ronie have a different role to play. When the defensive wall on the eastern side opens, I will be drawing the enemy’s attention. You’ll need to go to the aid of the space force base at that time. You can use wind-element flight, correct?”

“Y-yes. It’s just that we can’t fly as freely as Kirito does, and it will cause a very loud sound, like a gale of wind…”

“That’s all right. At this height, you can reach them even by gliding, and the sound should be drowned out by the roaring of the dragoncraft’s engines.”

“…Understood. We’ll take care of the base!”

Tiese and Ronie performed the abbreviated knight’s salute.

“Thank you. But don’t get yourself hurt,” Alice said, saluting back. She turned to her sister. “Selka, there are two things I want you to do.”

She leaned close and quickly relayed her instructions, just before Airy spoke up from the northwest corner of the floor.

“The preparations are complete, Lady Alice.”

“Thank you, Airy.”

She had made all the moves she could. The only thing left to do was fight like her life depended on it.

There was a pouch on her belt that she removed and handed to Selka. “I have one last request. Would you hold this for me, Selka? It’s very important to me.”

“Of course…but what is inside, Alice?”

“They’re Amayori, the dragon you met in Rulid, and its brother, Takiguri. They’ve been reverted back into their egg form. One of my other goals was to hatch and raise them.”

“Amayori’s egg…,” Selka repeated, wide-eyed. She clutched the pouch carefully to her chest. “I will do this for you, Alice. I’ll keep them safe, no matter what it takes.”

“Thank you.”

She brushed her little sister’s shoulder, then took a step back. The timer on one of the floating windows was under four minutes.

There was no movement from the formation of dragoncraft, but it was painfully clear that their Incarnate weapons were still trained on the cathedral.

Alice gave them all a bob of her head and turned away.

With her left hand resting on the Osmanthus Blade, she rubbed a coiled whip equipped beneath her belt pouch with the right. It was the Frostscale Whip, a Divine Object left behind by Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-One after he perished in the Battle of the Eastern Gate. Although Alice was not able to wield it herself, simply having it on her belt gave her strength.

She made her way around the X'rphan Mk. 13 resting in the middle of the floor and continued to the northwest corner. Airy was just tightening the last screws at the moment.

She straightened and put the screw tightener back into the toolbox. "I've finished the inspection and maintenance. It's ready to go whenever you want, Lady Alice."

"Thank you, Airy. I know this sounds scary…but I swear to you, I won't let you take a single scratch."

"It's fine, my lady. Focus only on the enemy and do not concern yourself with my needs," Airy replied at once. There wasn't a hint of fear in her eyes.

To Alice, this woman was hard to separate from the levitating platform operator she had been back in the old days. But after those events, Airy had been the yardmaster of the dragoncraft manufacturing facility. She must have piloted the craft on multiple occasions, then, perhaps even into battle. Being overly precious about her ability to take care of herself was pointless, Alice realized.

She smiled briefly and said, "I'll do that, then, Airy…Let's go."

"Very well," she replied, gesturing ahead of them.

It was a fully metallic circular platform, about five feet across. There was a handrail running around it, two sealed canisters below, and many exhaust ports. This was the levitating platform that Kirito had developed for Airy.

Alice hopped onto the step resting a good foot off the ground, then reached back to pull Airy up after her. She stood in the front, with Airy in the rear, both firmly holding the railing.

Three minutes remained.

"Go ahead, Selka!" Alice called out.

Over by the windows, Selka replied, "Okay!" and touched one of them.

With a heavy rumbling, the defensive wall before them began to open up, pulling apart upward and downward. Ten seconds later, the instant it was fully open, Airy called out, "Launching."

High-pressure air shot out of the ports beneath the platform, without any chanted commands, and the disc rose off the floor. It proceeded upward, sliding through the aperture, out of the cathedral entirely. They had been inside the heated tower all along, so the December night air was bitingly cold, but Alice did not feel it.

Airy promptly steered the levitating platform up to the ninety-ninth floor. Up close, there were indeed countless pits and cracks in the marble exterior of the wall. Normally, the regenerative qualities of the building would repair the damage in no time, but this still hadn't happened, even seven minutes after the attacks—an effect of the Incarnate weapons' overwriting effect.

The sight of so many brutal scars made Alice angrier than she expected to be. Although she didn't realize it, spending the majority of her short life in Central Cathedral gave her more than a little attachment to the place.

She adjusted her direction to face the three large dragoncraft. Instantly, as though waiting for this signal, the center craft emitted rays of white light from its back.

The light gathered into a detailed image, a figure who stood more than sixty feet tall. The menace calling himself Emperor Agumar Wesdarath VI stared at the two with haughty arrogance and opened his mouth to speak.

"Illegitimate occupiers, if you have come to beg for my mercy and swear obedience, cast aside the sword you bear."

His booming voice washed over Alice's being.

Below, the city of West Centoria wailed with many sirens as emergency vehicles rushed back and forth. The sidewalks along the major roads were filled with people in nightclothes, looking up at the sky to see what was happening. It seemed the city had

barely started evacuating the citizens. That made it all the more crucial not to allow any dragoncraft to crash-land there.

By placing his dragoncraft directly over the city, Agumar was making hostages out of the citizens of the country he claimed control over. Such a man had no business calling himself an emperor.

As they had planned, Airy quickly recited a sacred art. A film made of crystal elements appeared in front of Alice's face, and the air around them began to swirl in a funnel shape. It was a voice-projection art meant to allow her words to reach a great distance.

Sucking in a deep breath of chilling air, Alice grabbed the hilt of the Osmanthus Blade and drew it free.

She held it high overhead, glimmering in the starlight.

"My name is Alice…Integrity Knight of the Axiom Church, Alice Synthesis Thirty!!"

The decision to name the Church of the past was a deliberate one. She brought down the sword, leveling the tip at the three-dimensional image in the distance.

Agumar's eyes flared slightly, seemingly taken aback by her reaction. Alice fixed him with a stare and delivered her speech:

"Whether you are indeed the true progeny of the imperial line, so-called Agumar Wesdarath VI, or an arrogant pretender to the throne, the word of an Integrity Knight is not to be ignored!! I command you to land your craft outside of Centoria's limits, cease your attack on the space force base, and surrender along with all your soldiers!!"

Her amplified voice traveled not just to the three dragoncraft, but over a wide section of Centoria, she was certain.

According to Selka's explanation, the Rebellion of the Four Empires, which occurred after the Otherworld War, was started when the emperors at the time issued edicts that the Human Unification Council were traitors who had destroyed the Axiom Church. In other words, the emperors were rebelling against the

Unification Council, specifically, and were not denying the authority of the Axiom Church in the least.

That meant that if Agumar was a descendant of the western emperors, as he claimed to be, he should not be able to defy the name of the Axiom Church. At least, that was the hope.

Sadly, that hope was instantly dashed.

"It is you who is the pretender, girl. The Axiom Church fell into ruin two hundred years ago, and its knights died out with it. Only the most naive of children believe the fairy tale that the Integrity Knights were sealed away and will one day come back to life. You are nothing but rats skulking in the sealed floors of Central Cathedral. I will give you one more opportunity. Throw down your sword and prostrate yourself atop that winged insect you ride!! Otherwise, my dragoncraft's flames will burn you to ashes!!"

Agumar pointed a finger imperiously at her, as though he could push the sword aside from there.

Alice would have assumed that referring to the flying platform as a "winged insect" would rankle some feathers, but Airy's voice was as calm as ever.

"Lady Alice, I believe that statement was not meant for you, but for his soldiers, to quell any unrest based on what you just announced. I can only assume that the earlier attacks were meant for the knights who are currently petrified, as he just mentioned. I believe we should assume that he is aware the old Integrity Knights are kept on the ninety-ninth floor."

"Yes, I agree," she whispered back, to keep her voice from passing through the amplification art. Alice lifted the Osmanthus Blade slightly higher and pointed it at Agumar's image once more.

"I bear the Osmanthus Blade, a divine weapon, as proof that I am Alice the Integrity Knight!! Fire your missiles, if you wish!! From this moment on, not a single one of them will touch Central Cathedral!!"

"Then I will turn you and *that sword into ash!!"*

Agumar lifted his right hand, then swung it down.

Three missiles launched simultaneously from under the wings of three dragoncraft.

13

"Haaaaaaah!!"

Integrity Pilot Stica Schtrinen launched herself off the floor with a piercing cry.

Her sword, held at the waist, took on a pale glow, ready to execute the Norkia-style ultimate technique Waterwheel Slice. An unseen force accelerated her charge, instantly closing the gap between her and the enemy.

An ultimate technique increased the power and speed of the slice dramatically, but made it much harder to hit the intended spot. Even still, Stica performed some subtle contortions to fine-tune her aim and drove her swipe right into the relatively thin flank of her target's metal armor.

It made a dull *thwack!* sound. The armor broke, and the sword sank more than ten cens into the body underneath. But instead of the sensation of biological flesh and bone being severed, the physical feedback was more like cutting a clump of wet sand.

"Shaaaa!"

The enemy howled with aggression, not in pain of any kind, and raised its hefty machete-like weapon.

"Ugh…"

She danced back, just before the knife struck the spot where she had been standing. It crushed the stone tile into pieces.

"You all right, Sti?!" shouted Laurannei from the back. She was engaged with her own foe, however, and couldn't come to Stica's aid.

"I'm fine!" she replied, taking her distance. "But cutting him doesn't seem to have any effect!"

"Same here!" said Laurannei, sounding worried.

Their foes were obviously neither human nor demi-human.

They stood with an extreme forward tilt, yet were still 180 cens

tall. Their torsos and arms were notably long and narrow, while their legs were thick and short. Their bodies were covered with armor like slabs of metal stuck together, and they wore sleek helmets, but the mask portion on the front had four eyeholes, and the eyes behind them glowed a deep red. What exposed skin they did have was such a dark gray, it was nearly black.

It was said that there were many strange creatures living on the undeveloped continent of Cardina, but there was no record of anything like these monstrosities in the Pilothood's registries of knowledge.

"*Hissss…*," the monster growled as it approached. There was sticky black liquid dripping from the wound Stica's best technique had inflicted, but even that would dry up in a matter of seconds.

The monsters had attacked the space force base just ten minutes ago.

Stica and Laurannei were in their two-person room on the third floor of the pilots' barracks, enthusiastically discussing the day's events. It was stunning enough that they had set foot inside the sealed floors of Central Cathedral, which hadn't been opened in a century. Seeing the Star King's own X'rphan Mk. 13, enjoying a dip in the legendary Great Bath, and even meeting their proud Integrity Knight ancestors, Tiese Schtrinen Thirty-Two and Ronie Arabel Thirty-Three, all in one day, was unfathomable to them.

There were so many things they wanted to ask their elders, who had taken part in events like the Otherworld War and the Rebellion of the Four Empires, which were mere historical footnotes to the girls. But Commander Herlentz had not approved their request to extend their leave of absence, so they had to return to base. After the ten o'clock lights-out, however, they were unable to fall asleep and were still in their uniforms, talking, when they heard the explosions.

They rushed to the window, just in time to see huge flames billowing up from the dragoncraft hangars on the south side of the base.

The Underworld's Space Force was split into four flight groups —Cattleya Company, Anemone Company, Marigold Company, and Dahlia Company—each containing sixteen Teira Mk. 6 dragoncraft, including reserves. The flames were coming from each company's

hangar, telling the girls that this was not an accident, but a deliberate attack. Next, they rushed to the west-facing window.

From this one, they had a view of the space force headquarters' command center, adjacent to the pilots' barracks. The Integrity Pilots' Blue Rose Company had their hangar on the first floor of the command center, so the Keynis Mk. 7s they flew might have been under attack, too. Fortunately, they saw no flames from that direction.

Instead, they saw dozens of strangely shaped figures breaking the exterior glass doors to the building and going inside. The Star King himself had designed the command center to have armor plating that would seal off any weaker entry points in an emergency, but that system was not activating now.

Even still, the base was surrounded by sturdy four-mel walls on all sides and had security guardsmen on watch. Why did the alarms go off well before they reached this far into the base? But Stica found out why when Laurannei grabbed her arm and pointed to the sky in the opposite direction.

Almost directly overhead of the command center, a single large dragoncraft was in a hover. The pitch-black armor, cast in red by the flames rising from the hangars, and the body, shaped like the sacred letter *V*, were both identical to the large dragoncraft that Kirito and Eolyne had found on Admina.

Clearly, this black dragoncraft had bombed the hangars and lowered the strange-looking soldiers onto the command center. But if they were seeking to neutralize the space force and Integrity Pilothood, why didn't they bomb the center as well? After a moment, realization set in. They either wanted to take it without destroying it or there was someone they wanted to take captive rather than killing them.

If either, it was probably the latter. And that someone was probably Commander Herlentz.

With that realization came the arrival of the barracks' alarms at last, along with the vice commander's voice through the transmitter on the wall.

"All pilots, arm yourselves and head to the command center. Our top priority is to secure Commander Herlentz's safety, and our second priority is to eliminate all enemy creatures within the base.

The commander is most likely on the seventh floor, in either his office or his personal quarters. Act as soon as possible; do not wait for further orders."

Thankfully, the girls were still in their uniforms. Stica and Laurannei simply grabbed their standard-issue swords from the rack on the wall and rushed out of the room. Rather than heading to the front door on the ground floor, they opened the window at the end of the third-floor hallway and used wind-element jumping to travel through the air. It was a far cry from the wind-element flight that the Integrity Knights of the past were said to be able to use, but by releasing a wind element from their soles with each step, the air pressure pushed them upward, so they could travel about thirty mels through the air before landing.

When they reached the third floor of the command center, they took advantage of the fact that the armored plates were not down and broke through a window to get into the hallway.

From there, they rushed up the empty emergency stairwell until they got to the seventh floor, where the pilot commander's private quarters were located. They had run no more than ten mels when two enemy creatures appeared around the corner ahead and blocked the way, forcing them to draw their swords and fight.

In the two minutes of combat since, Stica had hit her foe with three slashes, including an ultimate technique, and the enemy didn't even seem to be pained, much less defeated. Stica's and Laurannei's longswords had the highest priority level of all the standardized weapons allowed for personal use, and their ultimate techniques were obviously very powerful. The fact that they couldn't even slow down the enemy was a sign that their foe's durability was numerically and categorically abnormal.

Fortunately, the things weren't that fast, so the girls were able to avoid the attacks, but if even a single strike from those thick machetes landed, they would be seriously injured, if not killed instantly, given the wrong location. The longer the fight went on, the higher their chances of getting hit, and their top priority was not defeating the enemy, but securing the safety of the commander.

After a right turn up ahead, at the end of the hallway and

attached to his office, would be his personal quarters. They just had to get there first.

"Laura, let's try to get them bundled up in the same spot somehow!"

"Try to think of what 'somehow' is supposed to be before you make a suggestion," Laurannei groused, although she already had a good idea. "Sti, let's circle around your enemy and slip past them together! One, zero!"

At least start from three!

Stica pushed off the ground. The enemy reacted, pulling back its blade. She leaped right below it, stifling her momentary terror.

She barely made it past the *whoosh* of the falling machete, but it brushed the hem of her jacket, and that alone made the fabric split like paper. The pilot's uniform was supple but highly resistant to slashes and sacred arts. The fact that the weapon was able to cut through it so easily was a sign of how high its priority level was.

Once past the enemy's left side, Stica put distance between it and her. But Laurannei, slipping through on the right side, began to slow down unnaturally. She had activated an ultimate technique.

"Rrraaahhh!!"

With a fierce cry, she spun her sword with both hands at mid-level, body and all. The horizontal swing left a crimson trail that dug deep into the side of the enemy spinning around to face her and knocked it back farther into the hallway.

That was the Baltio-style ultimate technique Stormy Sea. The trajectory of the attack resembled Waterwheel Slice, but it took longer to charge and had much more power.

It was a technique that had been passed down through the Schtrinen family for generations. Stica had taught it to Laurannei, and at some point, she had totally mastered it. But there was no time for Stica to feel admiration or jealousy.

The bowled-over enemy slammed into the other one behind it, and they fell to the floor together. Stica promptly threw her hands out and began to intone a command.

"System Call! Generate Cryogenic Element!"

Five on the fingertips of her left hand, but only four on the

right, because her thumb was holding the sword in place. Nine frost elements in total cast a pale light on the corridor.

Normally, she would follow this with a shaping command, a trajectory command, and a shooting command, but the enemy was already rising again. She shortened the process by simply shouting "Go!" to fire the frost elements.

Nine lights zipped forward, leaving trails in the air. The instant they made contact with the enemy, she cried, "Burst Element!!"

Bshhk! The air shivered, and the two enemies turned bone white. The frigid air of the frost elements had frozen them over. But this would only briefly slow them down.

"Haaaaah!!" she bellowed, wringing out all the Incarnation she could. With another hefty creak, the ice surrounding the enemy grew thicker before their eyes.

If she did this anywhere other than the specially screened training grounds, all of the base's Incarnameters would go off and get her in trouble, but no one would care now. The iceberg grew until it reached the ceiling, and she lowered her hands only when she was certain that the two enemies were trapped beneath it.

Immediately, she swooned slightly as the effect caught up with her head. Fortunately, Laurannei was there to put a hand on her back and keep her upright.

"Can you keep going, Sti?" her friend asked, as blunt as ever.

"Of course I can," she replied, standing on her own.

Considering the enemy's strength, even a cage of ice as strong as could be might last only five minutes. They had to meet up with the commander and escape the command center by then.

After one deep breath, she had recovered enough to go on; they resumed their sprint. The stone-tiled corridor intersected with a wider central hallway up ahead. If they turned left, they would reach the main stairs and a levitation shaft, but if they turned right, they would be at their destination, the office.

Stica leaned forward as far as she could, hurtling herself off the left-hand wall to reorient herself into the central hallway.

"…!!"

On pure reflex, she dropped her hips and came to a rapid stop.

Just ten mels ahead, there were more of the enemy creatures —four of them.

"Fhhsshhh…"

One of them noticed the girls and growled. The other three turned to see.

Through the holes opened in the strangely shaped helmets, sixteen eyes glowed red, staring at the two pilots.

"Sti…," Laurannei whispered. Ever since they were in their first year of juvenile school, it had always been Stica's role to take action in situations like this. But now, not a single good option came to her mind.

The Integrity Pilothood had four pilots, excluding Commander Herlentz, who outranked Stica and Laurannei. The vice commander, the flight captain, the swordcraft master, and the sacred arts master could all use the Perfect Weapon Control and Memory Release arts; they were undoubtedly the strongest swordsmen in the Underworld.

So where were the four who should have been here before anyone else? Stica started to curse them, then realized that it was only because they were holding off all the other creatures on lower floors that there were *only* this many on the seventh.

Fleeing wasn't an option. They had to do something about these four somehow.

"Laura, I'll…"

Be a decoy, so you can slip past to the office, she started to say.

Then there was a tremendous metallic crash from behind them.

Stica spun around on pure reflex and saw the front glass in the main stairway room shattering to pieces.

The dragoncraft hovering overhead had dropped more creatures onto the building, Stica instinctually thought—but she was wrong. What came through the spray of glass shards, whipped up by the vortex of wind elements, were two women wearing old-fashioned white knight's uniforms, with swords at their sides. One of them had brilliant scarlet hair, while the other's hair was the deep brown of cypress bark…

Integrity Knights Tiese Schtrinen Thirty-Two and Ronie Arabel Thirty-Three had learned of the danger to the space force base and come to help.

They alit on the floor without a sound. Stica very nearly shouted, *Ancestors!* but composed herself first and reframed her feelings. "Lady Tiese…Lady Ronie!"

"You're both all right?!" shouted Tiese. She released the remaining wind element under her feet and leaped over twenty mels of space at once. When she landed in front of Stica and Laurannei, her sword was already drawn and pointed at the four enemies.

"Ahhh…minions," murmured Ronie, who landed next to Tiese.

Stunned, Laurannei asked, "Y-you know what they are?"

"Yes. Unfortunately," Ronie replied, drawing her sword, too.

The so-called minions hissed menacingly at the women but did not draw closer. It was almost as though they'd been ordered to block the way to the office. If that were true, it would suggest that enemies had already infiltrated their destination.

"Commander Eolyne is in the room behind them!" Stica cried, in the grips of panic.

But Tiese just held out a hand, gesturing her back. "I know. Ronie, get the two on the left."

"Roger that."

Stica could only stare in wonder as the pair of knights readied their swords in formation ahead of her.

If they knew what the monsters' name was, they would know of their horrible durability as well. Yet they expected to defeat all four of them at once, just with swords?

Tiese and Ronie held their swords over their right shoulders in perfect unison.

The blades glowed a deep shade of red. It was an ultimate technique—but that color and pose did not belong to any techniques Stica knew.

The minions reacted to the light, lifting their machetes.

"*Bshhuuuu!!*" they roared with malice. Spreading out to block the hallway from edge to edge, they pressed down on the women in a surge of motion.

Then the women bolted into action.

Their thin longswords reached out to block the blades of the innermost two. *This is crazy*, Stica thought. The ultimate techniques would lift the power and speed of an attack dramatically, but they would not change the priority or durability of the swords themselves. The minions' machetes were equivalent in priority to the Pilothood's standard swords, so if they struck equally, the swords would either lose or, even worse, break in two.

However…

Tiese's and Ronie's swords, which glowed in a deeper shade of red than that of Stormy Sea, easily shattered the two-cen-thick steel machetes as easily as if they were panes of glass.

The blades continued through, cutting deep into the minions from shoulder to chest. But then the machetes of the outer two creatures came hurtling forward.

With a roar like the heat-element engine of a dragoncraft, the women's swords leaped upward, striking the machetes from below and once again shattering the steel.

A two-part technique! marveled Tiese, but it was not finished yet. The swords swung back down, the angle and speed ignoring all concept of inertia, mercilessly gouging the chests of the outer minions.

The fourth attack hit the inner minions.

The fifth, the outer. Sixth, inner.

The seventh swings, downward diagonals, cut through two minions at once, and at last the knights' ultimate technique was over.

Tiese and Ronie came to a stop at the end of the follow-through, while behind them the minions hurtled backward, spraying black blood and toppling to the floor atop one another.

"A seven-part…combination," Laurannei rasped in disbelief.

Stica was just as stunned.

Out of the ultimate techniques passed on through the Integrity Pilothood, the greatest number of strikes belonged to the Norkia style's Lightning Slash Profusion and Waterwheel Slice Hail, both of which hit four times. And only five elite pilots had been granted permission to learn them; Stica and Laurannei would have to train for years to even learn the initial form…

But actually, the real shock was not the number of parts in the technique, but the potency of each strike. Every one of the dizzying sequence of blows seemed to be far more powerful than even the High-Norkia style Mountain-Splitting Wave.

Once certain that the minions were truly neutralized, Stica gingerly spoke up. "Um…L-Lady Tiese? What was that…?"

"Deadly Sins, from the Aincrad style."

"A-Ain…?"

She had never heard of that style or technique before.

The Integrity Pilothood was supposed to contain techniques from every sword school in the entire human realm. Could that really be possible…?

Tiese grabbed Stica's shoulder. "Come. We must rescue Eolyne."

"Ah…y-yes, of course!"

She started to run down the hallway with them—when the bodies of the minions, which should have been completely killed by Tiese's and Ronie's seven-part techniques, shivered.

They splurted and burst, shooting tendrils of black liquid in every direction. Because the four women were a good distance away, it did not reach them, but the stringy liquid stuck to the floor, ceiling, and walls, instantly hardening and forming layers of netting that blocked the hallway.

"……!"

Ronie raised a hand and silently generated ten wind elements, then turned them into a small whirlwind that she pushed forward. The black nets shook violently with the power of the wind but did not tear loose.

"Hahhh!"

This time it was Laurannei, striking at the nets with her sword.

It made a horrible, ear-piercing clash that produced orange sparks. Laurannei and her sword were thrown backward by the impact of the collision, and Stica rushed forward to help support her weight.

The four were stuck, helpless, before the nets.

And through the doorway just ten mels past the netting, they could hear the faint clanging of swordfighting.

14

"Enhance Armament!"

On Alice's command, the Osmanthus Blade's body split apart into a plethora of tiny petals.

This was the second time today that she was using the Perfect Weapon Control art. The sword's life was not fully recovered yet, she knew, but it would just have to make do.

The minute petals, which glittered so brightly they seemed to be casting a light all their own, split into three bunches on Alice's orders and flew out to meet the three oncoming missiles.

"Haaaah!" she shouted, and brought down the hilt still in her hand. The flurries of petals writhed like living things, launching themselves at the missiles. Each single petal was less than a cen in size, but they carried a weight and priority level that was unthinkable for how small they were.

She could feel the swarms of petals penetrating the hulls of the missiles. The next instant, the projectiles exploded in the air, each at least three hundred mels short of the cathedral walls.

Flames erupted, an eerie combination of bright red and deep, dark blue. A split second later, the blast buffeted the levitating platform.

"……!!"

Alice grabbed the handrail with her free hand and steadied her feet.

Through the empty hilt in her right hand, she could feel the recoil of the explosions via the petals. It was a harsh, uncomfortable shock that numbed her from elbow to shoulder. Because they were Incarnate weapons, the feedback was different from a simple heat-element release. She squinted and saw the destroyed petals falling helplessly from the roiling flames and smoke at the center of the explosions.

She could tell that fighting off these missiles had cost her nearly 10 percent of the petals. If she blocked another nine of the same attack, the Osmanthus Blade would die. Although, considering the overwriting effect of the Incarnate weapons, it would probably happen sooner than that.

"*That was a very impressive bit of acrobatics, girl*," said the image of Agumar Wesdarath VI, still being displayed above the center craft. He wore a cruel, mocking smile. "*Then I shall have to present you with a show of my own. How will you like this one?*"

He snapped his fingers. Under each wing of each craft, three orange lights appeared instead of one, making six to a craft and eighteen for all three…

"…Lady Alice," whispered Airy. "I will withdraw. If you block those, your sword will—"

"No. Do not move us," Alice commanded. "If we run away now, I will never be able to call myself a knight again." She raised her right arm as high as she could.

Her will passed through to the petals, which arranged themselves into a rectangular shape thirty mels across. The individual petals, each rounded in the style of an osmanthus flower, audibly sharpened into points.

There was no guarantee that this would finish off any missiles. By piercing them instantly, she would attempt to lose as few petals as possible to the explosions.

Agumar lifted his arm, then swung it down, as casually as a flick of the wrist.

Eighteen missiles launched with the sound of a dragon screaming and began to fly toward Alice.

For just a moment, she lifted the hilt in her hand to her mouth, then she brandished it once more.

Instantly, more than two hundred mels away from the neat array of petals, the swarm of missiles exploded, one after the other, as though slamming into an invisible wall.

Dark-red flames billowed outward, sending massive ripples through the night sky—no, through the atmosphere itself. Her mind dulled by shock, Alice felt a strange sensation come over her. It was similar to something she'd felt before, the relief of being protected by something absolute.

The endless thumping of the explosions sounded strangely muffled and distant. Without realizing it, she was counting them, and when the eighteenth and final blast was over, she heard a voice.

"Alice, Airy, sorry to keep you waiting."

It came from over her left shoulder. Alice turned to see.

Floating there in the middle of the air, with nothing under his feet, was a black-haired young man in a perfectly prim pilot's uniform with two swords at his sides. There was no way Alice could ever mistake the confident grin on his face for anyone else's.

"…Kirito," she breathed out, her voice faint. It couldn't be him. When Alice had briefly logged out to make contact with him, Kirito was in his home, far from the Rath office. There was no means of wind-element flight in the real world. It would take him more than an hour to get to the Roppongi office, where the STLs were. And it hadn't even been twenty minutes yet.

"How did you get here so fast…?" she managed to say at last.

This elicited a shrug from Kirito. "You can thank Mr. Kikuoka for that. He set me up with an STLP at home for…You know what? We can talk about that later. I've got to go help the space force base."

"B-but…what about this situation right here?" Alice asked.

Kirito started to respond but was interrupted by a ray of white light that screamed right over their heads.

For an instant, she thought that the dragoncraft might have fired some kind of light-beam weapon, but it came from the opposite direction. It had been fired from the top of the cathedral, directly at the large dragoncraft in the middle of the formation.

The ray of light easily passed through the top of the dragoncraft and blew up the disc that served as an image projector. The large projection of Agumar Wesdarath VI, no longer smiling, vanished without a trace.

Alice twisted around, looking up at Central Cathedral behind them.

Atop the ninety-ninth floor, on the terrace part upon which the

rounded hundredth floor sat, was a small human figure.

It had long, flowing hair blowing in the breeze. A familiar Integrity Knight's armor and cloak. And in its right hand, a delicate rapier as thin as a needle.

"…Lady Fanatio," Alice whispered.

As though she could hear her, the distant knight raised her left hand and gave a faint grin—or so Alice imagined.

15

Operator Second Class Lagi Quint held his wounded right shoulder and tried desperately to stand.

But his legs were numb and would not heed him. The paralysis extended beyond his legs to his arm, back, and even the inside of his mouth. The blood of the enemy creatures that had landed on his wound must have included some kind of poisonous substance.

The space force's basic training included instructions for situations like this. The majority of poisons could be neutralized with light elements, so if he knew where the poison got in, he could start there, and if he didn't, he would have to cut open the skin on his arm to mix liquefied light elements into the bloodstream. It was a crude means of healing, but the formula was short and easy, and it was practical, too, because it would heal his life value at the same time.

Lagi tried to perform a light-element antidote as soon as he realized he'd been poisoned, but by then, his tongue was already too numb to intone the commands. There was a vial of antidote on his belt of battle equipment, but today was sacred arts drills, so he was wearing his regular casual wear instead.

Still, he at least had his sword. And the person he was meant to protect was still fighting. Crawling around in a miserable state on account of some measly poison was not an option.

He pressed his back to the wall and somehow got to his feet.

In the center of the spacious pilot commander's office was its owner, Eolyne Herlentz, locked in furious combat with the freakish enemy creatures.

"*Sha*!" he hissed, unleashing a two-part thrust that the enemy blocked with the backside of its thick blade. Instead of winding up to swing, it swiped the machete to the right, catching the chest of the commander's white shirt as he jumped back and tearing a

button loose.

In prime condition, the commander would have easily avoided it entirely or stayed back just far enough to deliver a powerful counterattack. But it was clear at a glance that his movements were growing sluggish.

There was no blaming him. Along the walls were the corpses of five more of the creatures that he had already defeated. The commander had been fighting for more than fifteen minutes since the things barged into the room and attacked, and his exhaustion had to be reaching its peak.

"……*Rgh*…," Lagi grunted, not even able to grit his teeth. He tried as hard as he could to move his legs.

Immediately, the commander stated calmly, "Don't move, Lagi. The poison will spread."

My duty is to protect you, he would have said, if he could speak at all. Tears blotted his eyes, born of frustration and self-loathing.

The Quint family stemmed from the famed warrior Azurica Quint, who was runner-up of the Four-Empire Unification Tournament (the predecessor of the current Human Unification Tournament) and later went on to be the director of the North Centoria Imperial Swordcraft Academy for life. Lagi's grandfather and father served in the space force, and as the eldest son, Lagi naturally chose to be an operator.

He strove his hardest as a soldier second class in Cattleya Company, and in just his third year, he was rewarded by a promotion from soldier to operator. Last year, while he was still officially a member of Cattleya Company, he was selected from the pool of candidates to be an Integrity Pilot, the group that headed the entire space force. As part of that pool, he participated in twice-weekly training exercises.

Just earlier today, the Pilothood's sacred arts master was teaching him high-level sacred arts theory. After his supper in the cafeteria on the second floor, he hurried back to Cattleya Company's barracks down the hallway. Commander Herlentz was walking alone ahead of him, so Lagi gave him a salute as he passed by the wall. But the commander had returned the salute and then asked, "Operator Quint, would you help me with

something?” Upon accepting the request, of course, Lagi found that he was intended to retrieve materials from the library on the fifth floor of the command center.

As they walked the piles of historical texts, maps, and so on to the office on the seventh floor, Lagi couldn’t help but notice how tired the commander seemed. But he was hauling documents himself rather than resting, so Lagi offered to help even more.

He had provided the commander with food and water, and even searched through some of the documents for him, until it was already eleven o’clock. He was just thinking that it was about time to get back to the barracks when it happened.

The commander abruptly got to his feet, looked at the ceiling of the office, and muttered, “Oh, damn.” Immediately after that, explosions rocked the building. Lagi wanted to run out of the office to see, but the commander stopped him. Less than a minute or two later, the door was blasted open, and a number of the strange creatures poured inside.

Lagi attempted to fight back, too, of course, but none of his attacks felt like they did anything. Using an ultimate technique finally felt like it inflicted some damage, but he immediately took a blow from one of their machetes, and the enemy’s blood from the wound he’d just caused spurted all over him.

He fell to the ground near the door, where he saw someone’s mirror-bright boots walk past his nose. Lagi looked up to see a tall man with black hair hanging to the middle of his back, wearing a dark-gray cloak that fell below his knees.

The man walked through the office without being accosted by any of the creatures and went right past where Eolyne fought for his life, to the large desk in the back of the room, which he then sat upon.

In the fifteen minutes since then, the commander dispatched five of the creatures. Only the one he was fighting now was left. But the mysterious man still leaned against the desk, arms folded. In fact, it seemed as though he was smiling.

He wore a brimmed hat the same color as his cloak, but even with that obfuscation, it was clear at a glance that the man was stunningly beautiful. He had pale lips, a finely shaped nose, and upturned eyes that were silvery-blue and piercing.

I feel like I've seen him before, Lagi thought, just before he was distracted by the commander shouting "*Haaah*!" and executing an ultimate technique.

A vertical slice slammed the enemy to the ground, followed by a pair of swings from left and right, and finally a big pullback to an overhead slash right down the middle. Although he'd never seen it in person before, Lagi recognized that this was probably a secret art of the Integrity Pilots, Lightning Slash Profusion…

The four-part attack left the enemy creature's torso in tatters. It hissed its dying breath as it was knocked off its feet. Toxic blood sprayed everywhere as it fell, but the commander swung his free left arm and created a gust of Incarnation that knocked all the liquid down.

Right after that, however, he stumbled and fell. Only the point of his sword against the floor stopped him from leaving his feet, but his exhaustion was palpable. He had already been tired when he returned to the command center, and that was before more than two hours of studying reference materials.

The mystery man clapped his hands twice.

"Very good, Eol. You defeated six Type-3 minions, and while you were fatigued, no less."

His voice was equal parts soft and cold.

The commander wiped away a trickle of sweat that issued from under his mask, then straightened his back. "Same to you…It must have been quite an ordeal to make the trip all the way to Cardina, after that desperate scramble for safety you exhibited earlier, Kouga. You must have a real hard-ass for a commanding officer," he said, his voice dripping with irony. But there was no hiding his exhaustion.

And what a strange conversation it was. The commander and the mysterious man were speaking as though they had just seen each other hours ago.

Plus, the name Kouga, which the commander mentioned, struck Lagi's memory center. He *had* seen that face somewhere before…

"Heh, I won't deny it. But it's my philosophy to use everything that I can make use of," the man named Kouga said, smirking. He extended a hand and pointed courteously at the window behind

the desk. “Will you make a trip up to the roof with me, then? I’m afraid this hasn’t yet been a greeting worthy of the noble Commander Eolyne Herlentz.”

“I’d rather pass, thanks. I still haven’t finished with the day’s work yet,” the commander replied, lifting the sword he was using to prop himself up and leveling the point at the man.

Kouga’s lips pursed, though his arms remained folded.

Lagi felt the air itself crack with pressure.

The lingering remnants of battle floating in the air began to pop and sizzle. Even standing several mels away, Lagi’s body was subjected to fierce invisible pressure.

They were engaging in a battle of Incarnation, trapped in a deadlock. If there were an Incarnameter in this room, Lagi couldn’t have imagined what sort of a number it would be displaying.

But the stalemate lasted only seconds.

The instant a drop of sweat from the commander’s bangs hit the floor, his body, slender for a swordsman’s, floated off the ground and was propelled backward with incredible force.

Lagi’s breath caught in his throat. Eolyne was going to hit the wall.

But then, in nothing but empty air, someone’s arm shot out and grabbed Eolyne’s body.

There were faint clanging sounds. Around the commander, who floated in the air, a tall, translucent door began to take form.

In time, the door took real shape. It was a large crystal doorway, open wide.

Within the extremely thin frame was pitch blackness—no, night sky. A cold wind blew through the opening against a backdrop of glittering stars.

After the arm came legs. Then a body and then a head.

It was a man, about the same age as Lagi or maybe younger. He was wearing a pilot’s uniform, the kind for space flight. There were two swords at his sides. His hair was black and his eyes the color of deep night…

Lagi knew this young man’s name. Lagi himself had driven him from North Centoria to the space force base in a mechamobile that morning. His name was Kirito…and he was Commander

Herlentz's strange, enigmatic guest.

Lagi had assumed that he was some kind of special envoy on a secret mission from lands abroad, but apparently his guess was completely wrong.

Kirito looked over at the commander, who was propped up on his arm, and grinned at him. He reached out and ruffled the flaxen hair spilling over the white mask.

"I'm here to rescue you, Eo."

(To be continued)

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Sword Art Online 27: Unital Ring VI*.

At this point in time, I'd really like to get away from my habit of starting off with apologies in every afterword…but…I'm very apologetic about how long it took me to finish this book…To make excuses for myself, the first half of this year was chock-full of nonwriting work that kept me very busy. But I've been doing this for thirteen years now, and you'd think I would have gained a few levels in my schedule-management skill by this point. I'll make that one a goal of mine for next year!

(This next part will contain spoilers for this book.)

As for this volume…here comes apology number two! In the afterword for Volume 26, I wrote, *I think we'll be finding out more about the commander's mysteries next time*, and in Volume 27… we did not. There were too many things to cover from Alice's perspective, but that's no surprise, as it's been two hundred years for her. Perhaps you've all gotten a glimpse at what happened in the time after the Moon Cradle arc now. Central Cathedral and the space force base are in big trouble, but in the next volume, we really should be focusing more on Commander Eolyne at last… Also, I'm sure that Tiese, Ronie, Selka, and Fanatio will play a major part now that they're awake!

Also, a minor clarification: Stica and Laurannei are the descendants of Tiese and Ronie, but the number of generations apart they are has been hazy from book to book, so I'd like to clear that up now. If Tiese's generation is the first, then Stica's is the seventh, so the proper answer is that they are six generations

apart. Perhaps you might wonder about the second generation, Tiese's and Ronie's children, but that could be something I write about later.

Also, the older Integrity Knights who haven't appeared in the story get mentioned here, at least by number. Airy claimed that they can't be unfrozen at the moment, but if that problem gets solved, they might finally make an appearance. So for now, please use your imagination to guess what the Ancient Seven might look like: numbers Four, Five, Nine, Ten, Thirteen, Fourteen, and Fifteen.

That's all for the story. Let's talk a bit more about real-world things.

At the time this book is coming out in Japan, it should have been a month since *Sword Art Online Progressive: Scherzo of Deep Night* hit theaters. Sadly, because of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the movie's release had to be delayed, and at the time that I'm writing this, a new date has not yet been set. I'm very sorry to everyone who's been looking forward to it, but it was necessary to deliver the best possible movie to the fans. Have a little more patience and please do come out to see the movie when it's released.

Also, there will be a tenth-anniversary memorial event for the *SAO* anime in November called *Sword Art Online: Full Dive*. I wrote the script for this, and all the parts will be new stories. It will be streamed as well, so I'd love it if everyone gets a chance to watch.

And now the usual apologies. In this volume, I set a new record for slowness and made things very difficult for my illustrator, abec, and my editors, Miki and Adachi. But now that I look back at the afterword from the previous volume, I wrote almost the exact same thing…I even wrote, *I'll do my best to make things smoother next time*…Well, I know I have zero trust remaining, but next volume! Next volume! I want to keep that mentality going!

See you in the exciting and turbulent Volume 28, everyone.

Reki Kawahara—September 2022

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